

US Military Clears Itself of Blame in Syria Strike That Killed ‘Piles’ of Women and Children

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“It’s the standard government line: Mistakes were made but there was no wrongdoing. But if the same mistakes were being made over and over again for years, shouldn’t someone have done something about it?”

No U.S. personnel will be held accountable for a March 2019 airstrike that killed scores of Syrian civilians including women and children, the Pentagon said Tuesday in announcing that an internal investigation into the massacre found that no laws of war were broken and that there was no cover-up of the incident as alleged in a *New York Times* exposé.

An [executive summary](#) of a classified investigation led by U.S. Army Gen. Michael Garrett stated that “no rules of engagement (ROE) or law of war (LOW) violations occurred” in connection with the March 18, 2019 strike near the Syrian town of Baghuz that, according to an initial battle assessment, killed around 70 people.

While finding that “policy compliance deficiencies at multiple levels of command led directly to numerous delays in reporting” the civilian casualties, and that “administrative deficiencies contributed to the impression” that the Pentagon did not take the incident seriously, the probe concluded there was “no malicious or wrongful intent” by the military, and that there was “no evidence” to support allegations of a cover-up.

However, a former evaluator in the Defense Department inspector general’s office who attempted to investigate the Baghuz strike said he personally witnessed Pentagon brass trying to bury reports of the bombing.

“It’s the standard government line: Mistakes were made but there was no wrongdoing,” Eugene Tate [told](#) the *Times* in response to Garrett’s summary. “But if the same mistakes were being made over and over again for years, shouldn’t someone have done something about it? It doesn’t sit well with me, and I’m not sure it should sit well with anyone else.”

As Airwars we submitted evidence to General Garrett's review into allegations of a massacre of civilians by a US airstrike in Baghuz, Syria

We are deeply concerned by the Executive Summary and request more information on why the allegations were rejected <https://t.co/l81Ovuv171>

— Airwars (@airwars) [May 18, 2022](#)

“The investigation says the reporting was delayed,” Tate added. “None of the worker bees involved believe it was delayed. We believe there was no reporting.”

The airstrike remained concealed from the public until the publication of a November 2021 *Times* [investigation](#), which also revealed that a secretive Special Forces unit, Task Force 9, was responsible for the attack. One strike cell within the task force known as Talon Anvil [reportedly](#) killed and wounded Syrian civilians at 10 times the rate of similar units' airstrikes.

According to Pentagon officials familiar with the contents of Garrett's classified report, the military concluded that 56 people died in the Baghuz strike—52 Islamic State militants and four civilians—when a U.S. F-15E attack jet dropped a single 500-pound bomb on a large group of people.

However, evaluators appear to have used a standard [adopted](#) during the administration of former President Barack Obama under which all military-aged males in a blast zone are classified as combatants regardless of their actual status.

As in the botched Kabul strike — and more than 1,300 reviews of civilian casualty claims — the Pentagon found no wrongdoing in its investigation of a 2019 airstrike in Baghuz, Syria in 2019 that killed dozens.

It also concluded most of those killed were not civilians. <https://t.co/wWCTiyXXot>

— Azmat Khan (@AzmatZahra) [May 17, 2022](#)

The officials' claim stands in stark contrast with what U.S. personnel quoted in the *Times* exposé reported seeing at the time of the attack. According to the report, U.S. troops watching real-time footage of the strike “looked on in stunned disbelief,” according to an officer who was there, with one military analyst stating that “we just dropped on 50 women and children.”

After the strike, civilian observers “found piles of dead women and children,” according to *Times* reporters Dave Philipps and Eric Schmitt, who spent months investigating the attack.

“A legal officer flagged the strike as a possible war crime that required an investigation. But at nearly every step, the military made moves that concealed the catastrophic strike,” the pair explained. “The death toll was downplayed. Reports were delayed, sanitized, and classified. United States-led coalition forces bulldozed the blast site. And top leaders were not notified.”

Responding to Garrett's summary, U.S. Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin [said](#) in a memorandum Tuesday that

“our efforts to mitigate and respond to civilian harm resulting from U.S. military operations are a direct reflection of U.S. values,” and that “protecting innocent civilians is fundamental to our operational success and is a strategic and moral imperative.”

However, U.S. bombs and bullets have killed more foreign civilians than those of any other armed force in the world in recent decades. [According to](#) the Costs of War Project at Brown University's Watson Institute for International and Public Affairs, at least 900,000 people—including nearly 400,000 civilians—have died during the course of the 21-year U.S.-led War on Terror.

Throughout the war, few U.S. troops—and even fewer people higher up the chain of command—have been [held accountable](#) for harming civilians.

When asked during a Tuesday press conference why no one being held accountable for the Baghuz strike, Pentagon Press Secretary John Kirby [replied](#),

“I understand the questions about accountability, I get it.”

“In this case, Gen. Garrett found that the ground force commander made the best decisions that he could, given the information he had at the time, given a very lethal, very aggressive threat, in a very confined space,” he added. “It is deeply regrettable... we apologize for the loss of innocent life.”

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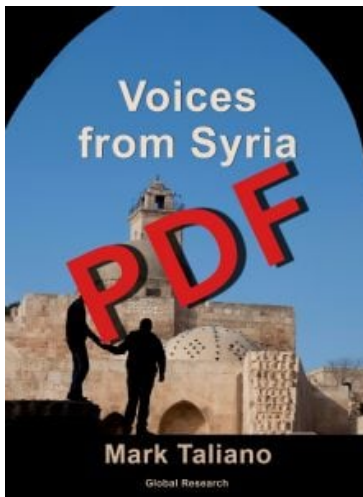
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