

Airwars

Annual Report 2021

Israeli airstrike in Al Shaboura camp in Rafah, Gaza (Source: Hani Al Shaer)

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Annual report 2021

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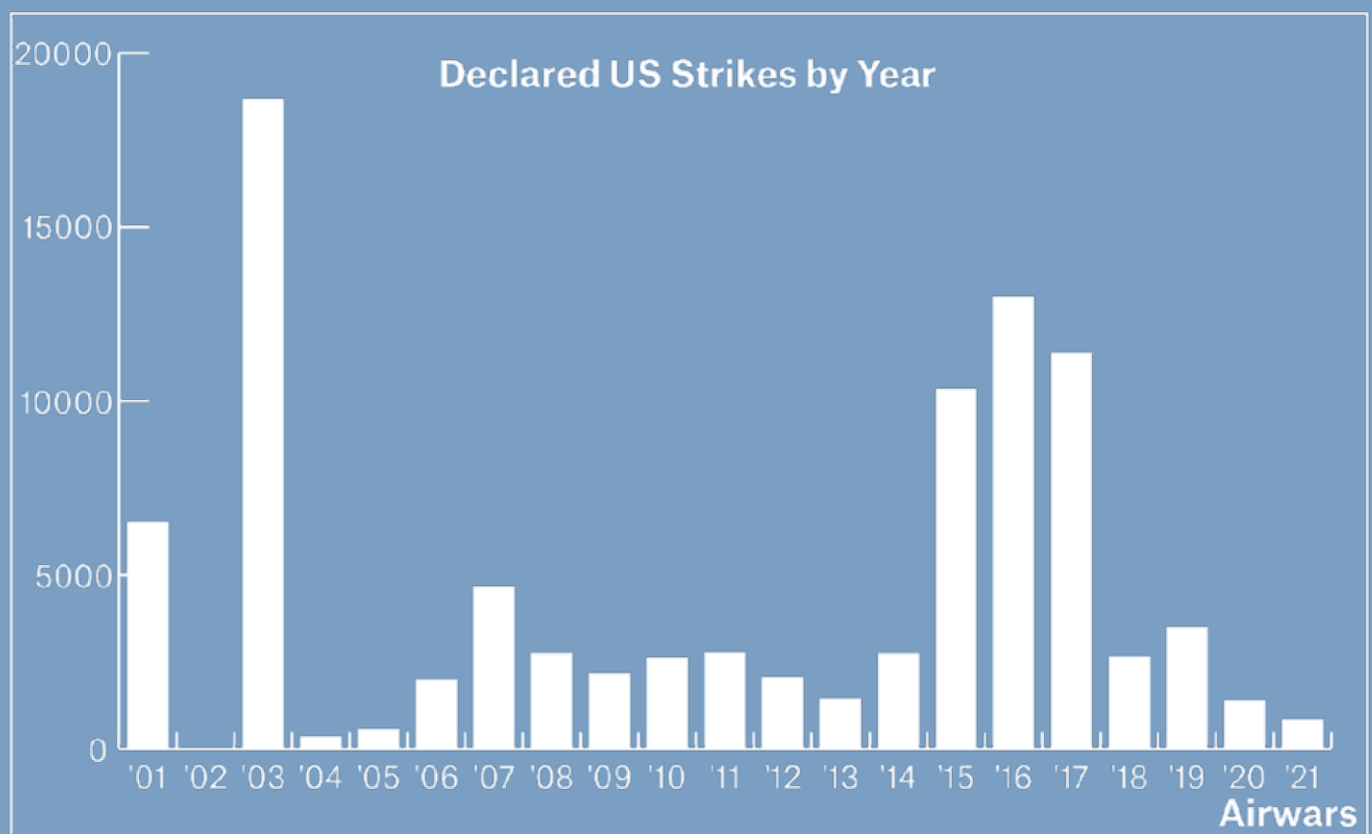
Director's Note

An axiom within the world of civilian harm monitoring is that conflict tempos and associated casualties can - and do - vary extremely. The year 2021 turned out to be another year of seismic movements.

Mostly, civilian harm trends continued sharply downwards across all conflicts monitored by Airwars - particularly after the Biden administration took office in January 2021. There had already been [a major fall in declared US strikes](#) during the last full year of Donald Trump's presidency - across Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, Somalia and Yemen. And US kinetic actions had also by then effectively ended in both Libya and Pakistan.

Under Biden, these downward trends accelerated further. Six month moratoria on US counterterrorism strikes were introduced in Somalia and Yemen - while in Iraq, the US-led Coalition announced that it would fully transition from a combat role to advise-and-assist by year's end. In Afghanistan, a US declaration that it would pull out fully by the summer - following a two decade military presence - led to an ugly stampede for the exits by allies.

Even taking into account hundreds of Afghanistan airstrikes which both the Trump and Biden administrations had initially kept secret, [2021 saw the lowest numbers of declared US military strikes globally since 2006](#).



Civilian casualties from reported US actions fell steeply too. While US strikes were confirmed to have killed a relatively small number of civilians in Syria, Afghanistan and Somalia during 2021, there were also no credible local allegations of civilians likely killed by US strikes in Iraq, Libya, Pakistan or Yemen.

Welcome as these casualty declines were, Airwars has been among many cautioning that US assumptions of low civilian harm from its own actions in recent conflicts remain highly problematic. We had warned, for example, in [our 2020 Annual Report](#) of an 80 percent collapse in US public determinations of civilian harm during the final large scale Deir Ezzor campaign against ISIS, indicating a waning of interest in the issue by US commanders. This was ignored by both the Pentagon and CENTCOM - until a series of devastating investigations by the New York Times in November and December 2021 pushed the issue of civilian harm back to centre stage.

From [cover-ups and potential war crimes](#) in Syria; to disastrous recent strikes on civilians in Afghanistan; and to [poorly staffed civilian casualty assessment processes](#) within the US military - the Times investigations led by Azmat Khan exposed chaotic, often indifferent, and even potentially criminal US actions which demanded urgent attention. Additional Congressional scrutiny helped provoke a series of reviews and investigations which may yet lead to significant shake-up in how the Pentagon determines civilian harm from its own actions.

Urban casualties

Critical as we might be at Airwars of the US military, it does at least have civilian harm assessment processes in place. European allies such as the UK, France and Belgium continue to deny civilian harm from their own actions - or instead routinely hide from accountability within broader coalitions. Only in the Netherlands have we and our Dutch partners seen a recent willingness for the Defence Ministry to more closely align with US military processes - and only then following the scandal of a four year Dutch coverup of [large scale civilian casualties at Hawijah](#).

Civilian harm from other actors monitored by Airwars also fell sharply during 2021 - which for example saw a full year of [ceasefire between warring parties in Libya](#). Our monitoring team also noted a 40 per cent decline in reported civilian deaths from actions by foreign actors in Syria - a welcome respite for those under almost continuous air attack since 2015. Alleged civilian deaths from Russian actions in Syria halved for example - from 570 claimed fatalities to 280. However, the threat of extreme violence upon the last rebel stronghold of Idlib remains. And [Russian accountability for large scale civilian harm in Syria](#) has been non-existent - a grim warning of what was to come in Ukraine.

After several years of monitoring, Airwars also published comprehensive civilian harm data for the long-running and [secretive Israeli air campaign in Syria](#), which targets Iranian and Iranian-linked assets. Perhaps surprisingly, that Israeli campaign has led to the lowest levels of reported civilian harm from any foreign actor fighting in Syria - primarily because Israel Defense Forces almost exclusively strikes military targets away from major population centres. This contrasted sharply with the May 2021 conflict between Israel and Palestinian factions - which led in particular to [extreme casualties over just just eleven days in the Gaza Strip](#).

The community-focused reports of civilian harm that we sourced in three languages, for both Gaza and Israel, added to a growing weight of evidence Airwars has gathered since 2014, which clearly shows the extreme price paid by civilians once fighting moves into urban areas. Whether in Mosul or Tripoli, Aleppo or Gaza, Hawijah or Sderot, the use of wide area effect explosive weapons upon cities and towns [remains a scourge of warfare](#) - and one which Airwars and partners are committed to challenging. We remain optimistic that a UN-brokered Political Declaration to restrict the use of such weapons may yet have teeth.

New leadership

This will be my last annual report as Director. After eight wonderful years at the helm of Airwars since its founding, I will be stepping down in Summer 2022 - to be [succeeded by the exceptional Emily Tripp](#), already doing great work as our head of research.

When Basile Simon and I founded Airwars back in 2014, our methodological approach was untested. Was it even possible to monitor, in real time, the directly reported experiences of local communities during large scale conflicts? Could we then use those findings to make baseline estimations of civilian deaths and injuries, primarily based on community reporting? And could we then leverage those extensive findings to seek accountability for civilian harm from belligerents? The answer to each of those questions has been a resounding yes. Today, Airwars is a well established, and well respected, international watchdog NGO, working unilaterally and in partnerships to effect positive change.

The organisation Emily will soon lead is confident - and with a clear sense both of purpose, and of how to seek positive change for communities affected by conflict. I wish Emily, her management and Boards - as well as present and future team members at Airwars - the very greatest success with their vital endeavours. I would also like to thank all those staff and volunteers who have previously been with us, and whose own vital contributions continue to form the bedrock of much that we do. My particular thanks go to Dmytro Chupryna, who recently stepped down as our Deputy Director after four remarkable years, during which he played a critical role in consolidating and systematising our funding, financial, and advocacy work.

It has been my absolute privilege to work with such an extraordinary, compassionate, and dedicated group of people, and I wish Airwars the very best for the future.

Chris Woods
Outgoing Director of Airwars

Summer 2022

Research

Gaza and Israel

In May 2021, Israel fought a fierce 11-day conflict with Hamas and other Palestinian militant groups. It was the fourth major clash between the sides in twelve years and, as on previous occasions, civilians paid the highest price.

With emergency funding from Open Society Foundations and the Violet Jabara Charitable Trust, Airwars quickly pivoted its organisational focus to document the entire civilian impact of the brief but intense conflict. Over six months and working for the first time in three primary languages - Arabic, Hebrew and English - our researchers investigated 165 locally reported civilian harm incidents in both Gaza and Israel.

The civilian harm database, interactive mapping and accompanying report - [Why did they bomb us? Urban civilian harm in Gaza, Syria and Israel from explosive weapons use](#) - were published in December 2021 in all three languages. The project has since been nominated for several major awards.

Our research concluded that between 151 and 192 civilians were killed by Israeli fire in Gaza during May 2021. In addition, between 15 and 20 Palestinian civilians were killed by rockets fired from Gaza that fell short. In Israel 10 civilians were directly killed by rockets fired by Hamas and Islamic Jihad from Gaza. Many more would have died were it not for Israel's Iron Dome missile defence system, with more than 4,000 rockets and mortars fired from the Gaza Strip.

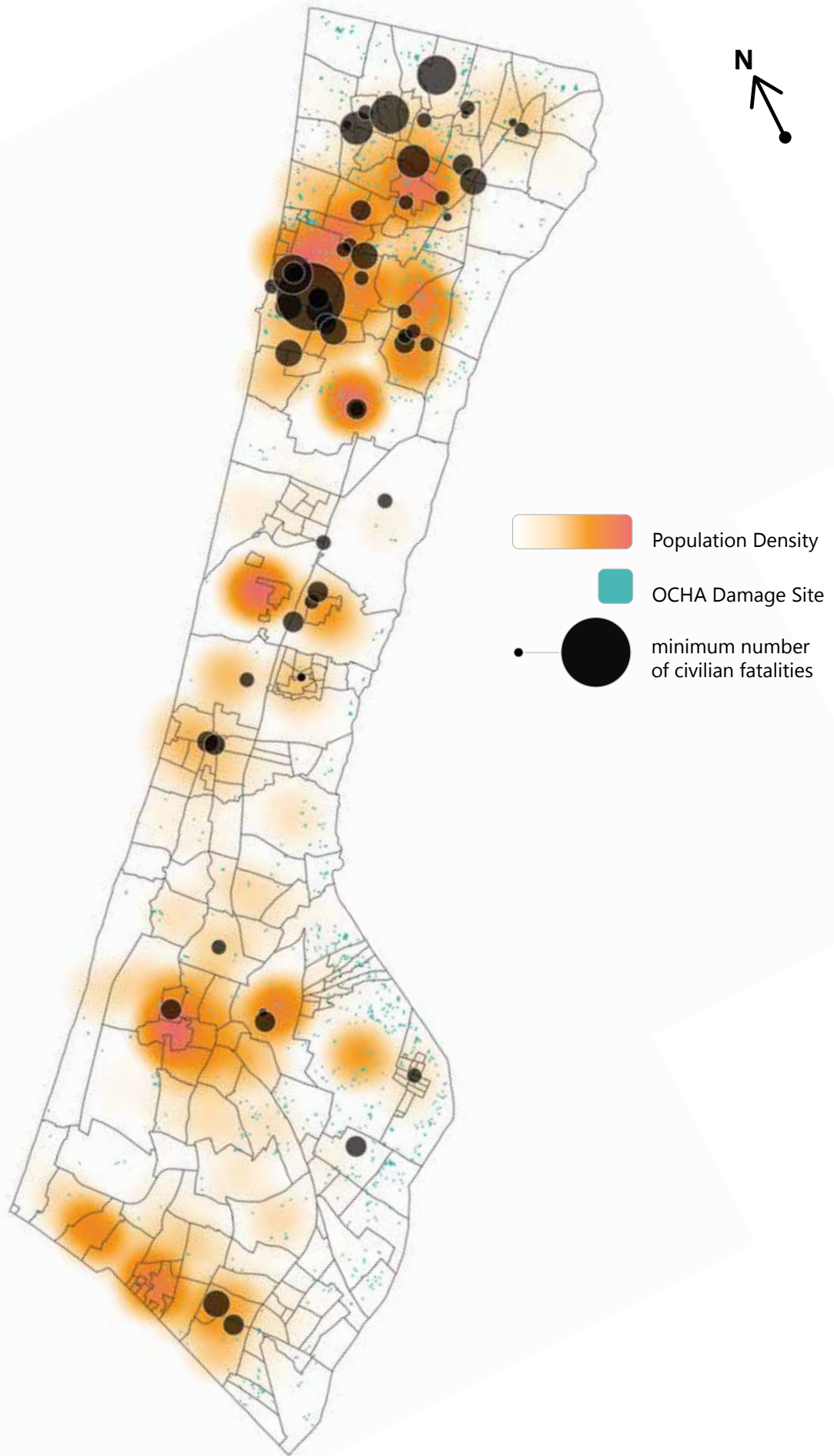
In more than 70 percent of incidents where civilians were reported harmed in Gaza - 101 of the alleged civilian harm events - Airwars found no local or official reports of militants having also been killed or injured in the attacks. That is, civilians were the only known victims. Over a third of all the Palestinian victims were children.

The report also included the first comprehensive public review of an extensive yet secretive Israeli air campaign in Syria since 2013 against Iranian-linked forces.

Airwars assessed that Israeli strikes in Syria were likely to have killed at least 14 and up to 40 Syrian civilians in the past eight years. However, compared in particular to all other foreign actors fighting within Syria, reported civilian harm from Israeli actions has been very low.

Comparatively, many times more civilians in Gaza were likely killed by the IDF during its eleven-day campaign in May 2021, indicating potentially different Israeli Defense Force operational practices in the two





aerial campaigns.

The report was also among the first times that Airwars has combined civilian harm data with population density data, adding to a growing body of evidence supporting restrictions on the use of wide area effect explosive weapons in populated neighbourhoods. Research has found that around 90 percent of all people killed or injured by the use of explosive weapons in urban areas are civilians.

To demonstrate the patterns of civilian harm in Gaza, one of the most heavily populated places on earth, Airwars produced a map (on page 10) showing all reported strikes in the strip and all civilian harm incidents, plotted onto a map of population density. The results were clear - the more heavily populated a neighbourhood was, the more likely civilian harm would occur.

The report's launch was widely covered in international and Middle Eastern media, including by The Times of London, The Intercept, Euronews, The Times of Israel, The Jerusalem Post, Mondoweiss, The New Arab, Middle East Eye and many others.

As part of Airwars' continued innovation regarding presentation of our civilian harm archive, we also developed a unique interactive mapping tool with our partners at Rectangle documenting [all civilian harm in Gaza](#) available in English, Arabic and Hebrew. This developed and expanded upon visual tools first deployed a year earlier in Airwars' mapping of [civilian harm in the siege of Tripoli in Libya](#).

Through interactive design, the Gaza mapping depicted how severely particular areas were impacted by the conflict, with viewers able to cycle through dozens of images of victims throughout the Gaza Strip. Each incident linked through to our database of individual reports, enabling simpler access to individual reports than Airwars has previously achieved.

The project has since been shortlisted for both an Amnesty Media Award, and a Sigma Award for Digital Innovation.

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WORLD AT FIVE

Collateral damage: the children who paid in blood when Israel and Hamas went to war in Gaza

A new study examines the cold calculations on both sides which determined how many civilian deaths were deemed acceptable.
Richard Spencer reports

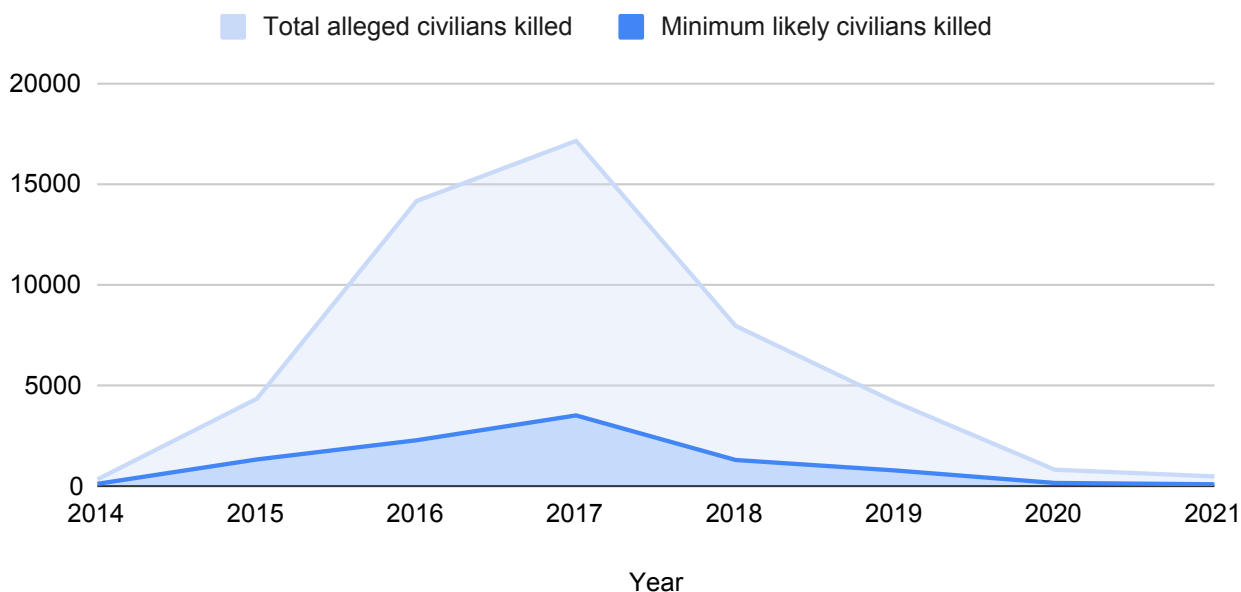


Syria

The situation in Syria during 2021 could broadly be defined as static instability. The civil war, which had begun as an uprising against President Bashar al-Assad in 2011 and morphed into a proxy conflict involving many of the world's largest military powers, has declined significantly in intensity in recent years, along with the associated foreign involvement. Yet protracted challenges remain, including issues such as control of territory, accountability for civilian harm, and ultimately justice for the hundreds of thousands of victims.

During the year there were no major offensives by any of the parties to the conflict, with relative calm leading to a welcome decrease in the number of civilians killed by foreign powers. The number of civilians likely killed by all foreign parties to the conflict was at least 83 and as many as 391. This was down 40% percent of total alleged civilian deaths from 2020, when between 149 and 658 civilians were likely killed, and by far the lowest annual figure since Airwars began monitoring civilian harm by foreign belligerents in 2014.

Civilian harm by all foreign belligerents in Syria by year 2014-2021



Russian actions continue at lower tempo

Since a March 2020 ceasefire deal between Turkey and Russia there has been an uneasy ceasefire in and around the northeastern province of Idlib, the only major part of Syria still under rebel control.

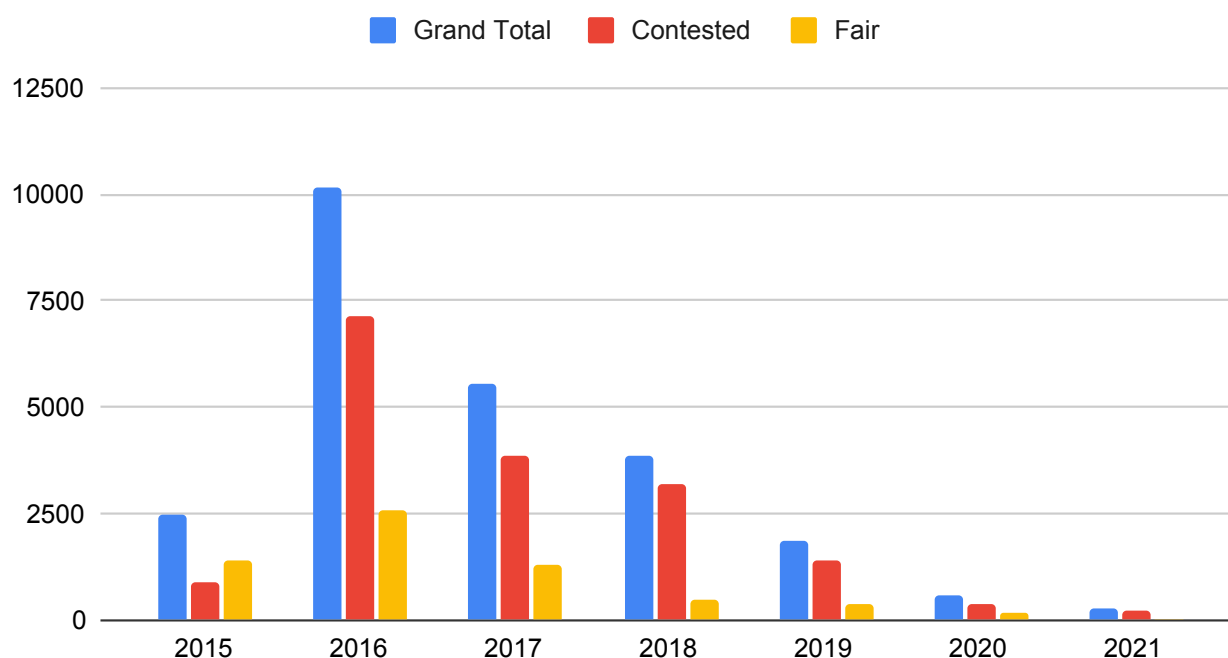
During 2021 Russia and the Syrian regime did not make a concerted effort to seize the territory but the two belligerents continued intermittently to strike Idlib with both air and artillery strikes.

As a result of this decreased intensity, allegations of civilian harm against Russia fell to their lowest rate since Moscow sent its forces to prop up embattled Syrian leader Bashar al-Assad in September 2015.

Even so, during 2021 at least 22 and up to 280 civilians in total were allegedly killed by Russian and/or Syrian regime air and artillery strikes, the majority in the Idlib region. This represented a 51 percent fall from 2020, when up to 577 civilians were likely killed.

The vast majority of those killed in 2021 (up to 250 of 280 likely fatalities) were in so-called contested events, where it was unclear whether Russia or the Syrian regime was responsible for the strike. The two belligerents conduct overlapping, and sometimes joint, operations. In addition up to 734 civilians were reported injured.

Maximum civilian fatalities from alleged Russian action over time



airwars.org

Approximately 48% of the year's civilian harm events resulting from alleged Russian action were in Idlib governorate, with a further 2% in Hama, and some 23% of claims in Aleppo governorate.

One trend that Airwars researchers noticed was a sharp uptick in the number of allegations of attacks using Krasnapol Russian guided artillery. In total there were 26 civilian harm events in 2021 in which local sources reported the weapon to be Krasnapol. No such cases were reported in 2020. The exact reason for this spike remains unclear but it is possible that Russia has distributed the weapon among some of its allies or Russia itself has deployed it more often - either directly or through mercenaries.

In one particularly egregious incident during 2021, two GRAD rockets hit a hospital in the city of Afrin in northwest Syria on June 12th, 2021. At least 13 civilians were killed, including a mother giving birth. The city has been a key battleground in the war and is currently under the control of Turkey and its allies.

Both Russia and the Syrian regime were accused of carrying out the strike, while others pointed the finger of blame at the predominantly Kurdish Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF). To date the perpetrator remains unclear.

In total, since the start of Russia's intervention in Syria in September 2015 to December 2021, Airwars tracked 4,709 locally alleged civilian casualty incidents reportedly linked to Russian forces. Between 4,300

and 24,742 civilians were allegedly killed in these events. Of those killed, where the age and gender of the victims were known, as many as 5,311 were children and 2,950 were women, and 4,204 were men. Moscow has yet to admit publicly to a single death as a result of its lengthy military intervention in Syria.

Turkey continues its occupation of parts of Syria

In October 2019, Turkey launched an invasion of parts of northeast Syria held by Kurdish forces, in a campaign it labelled Operation Peace Spring. Since then Ankara has maintained a presence, either direct or by proxy forces, in the area. During 2021 the Turkish presence remained largely static, with no major new offensives.

Over the year, Airwars tracked a total of 26 locally alleged civilian harm incidents from Turkish-led actions in Syria, resulting in at least 29 civilian deaths. This was a decrease from 2020, when Turkish actions led to at least 37 civilian deaths. A further 14-26 civilians were killed in contested events in which Turkey may have been responsible, but was not the only named belligerent by local sources.

Among the worst individual incidents occurred in August when at least four civilians, including three children, [were killed](#) in alleged Turkish shelling in the predominantly Kurdish town of Ain Issa. Four members of a single family were killed in alleged tank fire.

US-led Coalition continued ground actions

The US-led Coalition against the so-called Islamic State continued to operate at a low level in Syria during 2021, primarily in support of its local ally the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) against the remnants of the so-called Islamic State. Rates of civilian harm remained low.

In total there were between 15 and 27 civilians likely killed by US-led Coalition actions in 20 incidents throughout the year - mostly in combined air and ground actions to apprehend or kill alleged remnant ISIS fighters. This was roughly similar to 2020, when between 18 and 20 civilians were likely killed in 12 incidents, and marked a continued historic low across the duration of the seven year campaign.

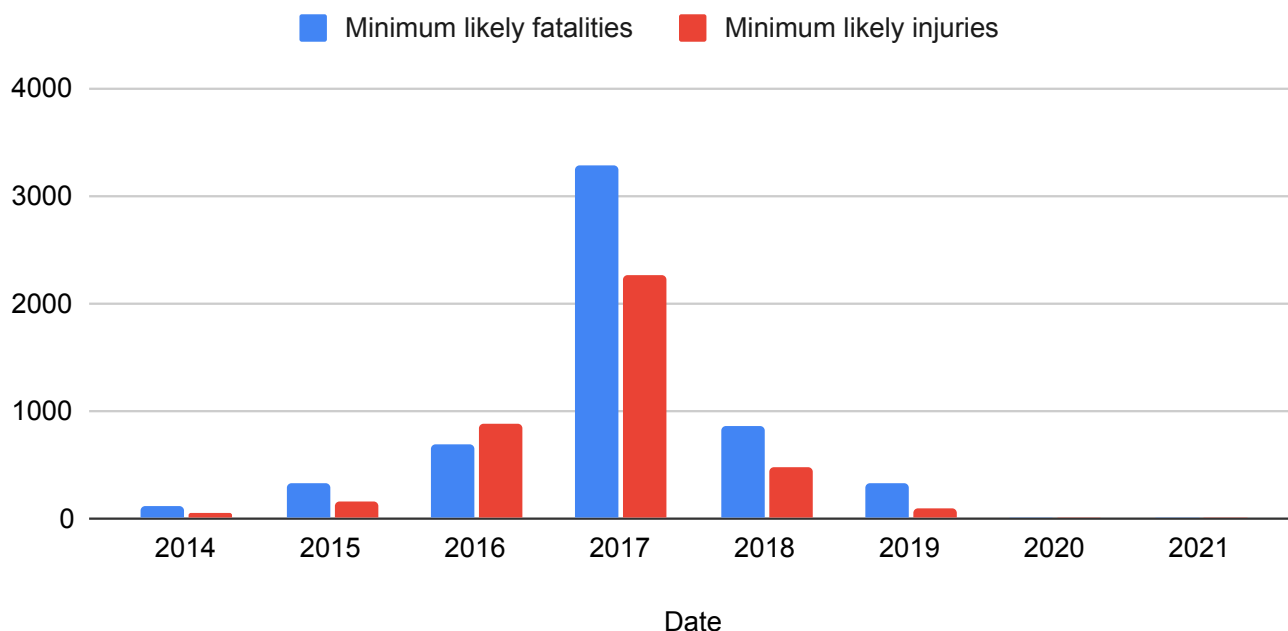
In one [typical incident](#) a man and his son were killed in an SDF raid backed by US forces in Thiban near Deir Ezzor on July 16th, 2021.

While the rates of civilian harm have decreased, 2021 saw growing pressure on the US government and other Coalition members to provide justice and better accountability for historic civilian harm incidents in both Syria and Iraq.

Between the beginning of the war against ISIS in 2014 and the end of December 2021, OIR assessed 2,968 incidents of reported civilian harm from its air and artillery strikes. The alliance has only conceded 350 of these events to be credible allegations of civilian harm, according to Airwars analysis.

While the Coalition now concedes killing, overall, at least 1,404 civilians in its long war against the Islamic State, Airwars believes the likely tally is in fact at least 8,192 to 13,243 civilians killed.

Minimum likely civilian harm estimates from alleged US-led Coalition actions in Syria since 2014



Kurdish forces

Civilian harm allegations against Kurdish forces in Syria continued to be reported at a relatively low rate throughout the year.

In total for 2020, Airwars tracked 34 claimed Kurdish casualty events. Overall between 40 and 63 civilians were reportedly killed by Kurdish forces in Syria. Of these between 21 and 32 civilians were killed in incidents assessed as fair, an increase from 13 to 17 such deaths in 2020.

Kurdish forces were also blamed by some for the Afrin hospital attack on June 12th which killed at least 13 civilians, though others have accused both Russia and the Syrian regime (see the Russia in Syria section, above). Among the events assessed as fair, the most harm was recorded in a single event on November 19th, where up to 17 civilians were allegedly injured during artillery shelling on Afrin.

Iraq

Although reported civilian harm from foreign belligerents operating in Iraq was low during 2021, the country remained unstable both politically and economically.

Frequent rocket attacks by Iranian-supporting militias targeted US military bases throughout the country, with occasional retaliatory US and Coalition airstrikes. And in November a mini drone attack targeted the outgoing prime minister Mustafa al-Kadhimi. [Iraqi security officials later said](#) it was carried out by at least one Iranian-backed militia, after many Iranian-linked groups claimed elections held a month earlier were rigged.

Meanwhile Turkey continued to expand its presence in northern Iraq, where it has established dozens of small military bases as part of its ongoing conflict with the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK).

Northern Iraq and Turkish offensive

According to Airwars data, 24 locally alleged civilian harm incidents were tracked throughout the year from Turkish actions, a slight increase on the 21 incidents reported in 2020. Airwars deemed 18 of these incidents as 'fair'. These incidents resulted in a total of between 18 and 25 civilian deaths and up to 33 injuries.

One noticeable trend was a significant increase in events stemming from Turkish artillery, rather than air or drone, strikes. Allegations rose from one incident in 2020 to eight in 2021 - potentially indicating that Turkish bases inside Iraqi territory are expanding closer to civilian villages and towns. As many as 12 civilians were injured by alleged Turkish artillery strikes across the eight incidents.

In February, in one of the most egregious incidents of the year, [thirteen mostly Turkish nationals](#) were killed whilst being held captive by members of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK). The bulk of sources alleged the men were executed by the PKK. However, due to Airwars' methodology the incident was graded as '[Contested](#)' as several sources alleged the men had instead been killed by a Turkish airstrike during the operation to free them.

Then on April 23rd 2021 the Turkish Armed Forces announced Operations Claw-Lightning and Claw-Thunderbolt, a major joint air and ground offensive aimed at dislodging the PKK from the Metina (Claw-Lightning) and Avaşin-Basyan (Claw-Thunderbolt) regions of northern Iraq. It was the latest in a series of Turkish operations spanning several years.

Areas around Mount Sinjar and the Makhmour refugee camp continued to be a regular target of Turkish airstrikes. On August 17th, Turkish aircraft struck the [Al-Askiniyah Hospital in the village of Sakina](#) in Sinjar district, killing four members of the medical staff and four fighters of the Sinjar Resistance Units, a PKK-aligned group. The attack followed a strike the previous day in which several members of the group were killed and wounded. Some of the wounded were then reportedly being treated at the targeted hospital. [Turkey denied that the building](#) destroyed in the strike housed a medical facility.

In Dohuk province, there were several incidents of reported civilian harm around the village of Hirure. This includes an event on September 4th in which three people were injured. Some sources alleged the use of [chemical weapons or white phosphorus](#) in the attack. Dr. Rasul Mohammed, a doctor who provided first aid to the victims, told Rudaw: "They had breathing issues. Their eyes teared up and were painful. Two of them



felt nauseous and dizzy. It was strange to me to see that a bombardment could cause these symptoms.” No further information regarding the accuracy of the allegations has come to light.

On August 20th two Iraqi tourists were killed in Dakar of Zakho district in what was widely reported to have been a Turkish air or artillery strike. [A subsequent investigation by Airwars](#) found the men were in fact likely killed by an improvised explosive device (IED), possibly planted by members of the PKK. This incident was part of a significant rise in reported harm in the Darkar region, with four incidents reported through the year. Prior to 2021, Airwars had recorded just one incident of reported civilian harm in Batifa sub-district over the course of six years of monitoring.

US Forces in Iraq

There were no reports of civilian harm caused by US-led Coalition actions in Iraq during the year though there were sporadic attacks on US bases throughout the country. Primarily these were blamed on Iranian-linked militia groups. There was an increase in mini drone attacks, rather than rocket strikes - in what appeared to be an attempt to avoid defence systems established at such bases.

In a particularly brazen attack in February 2021 at least fourteen rockets were fired towards the city of Erbil, the capital of the semi-autonomous Kurdistan Region. At least three rockets hit a major US-led Coalition base near Erbil International Airport, while the others hit residential areas.

There were hopes that the situation would calm following parliamentary elections in October 2021 as rivals sought to form a coalition government.

This marked the first year since the US-led alliance intervened in Iraq against ISIS in 2014, in which no civilian casualties were reported. The Coalition also [transitioned fully to an advise and assist role](#) in December 2021, formally moving away from the direct targeting of ISIS remnant forces.

Additional conflicts

Libya

Following a June 2020 ceasefire, Libya remained relatively peaceful throughout 2021, with no airstrikes or major military confrontations reported anywhere across the country. There were only four reported incidents of civilians killed by heavy munitions, down from 160 the year previously.

In February a [child was killed](#) and 30 others injured when a shell hit an event celebrating the tenth anniversary of the uprising that ultimately toppled dictator Muammar al-Gaddafi but ushered in a period of instability which still plagues Libya.

Separately in July, a prominent Libyan actor was [killed](#) by an RPG round fired in apparent celebration by a militia fighter in Tripoli. At least five others were injured.

Much of the year was dominated by a UN-led peace process which aimed to unify both political and military factions. The Libyan Political Dialogue Forum achieved a number of successes, and in February brokered the creation of a temporary unity government after multiple years of rival administrations in eastern and western Libya. This was seen as a key step towards unifying institutions divided since 2014.

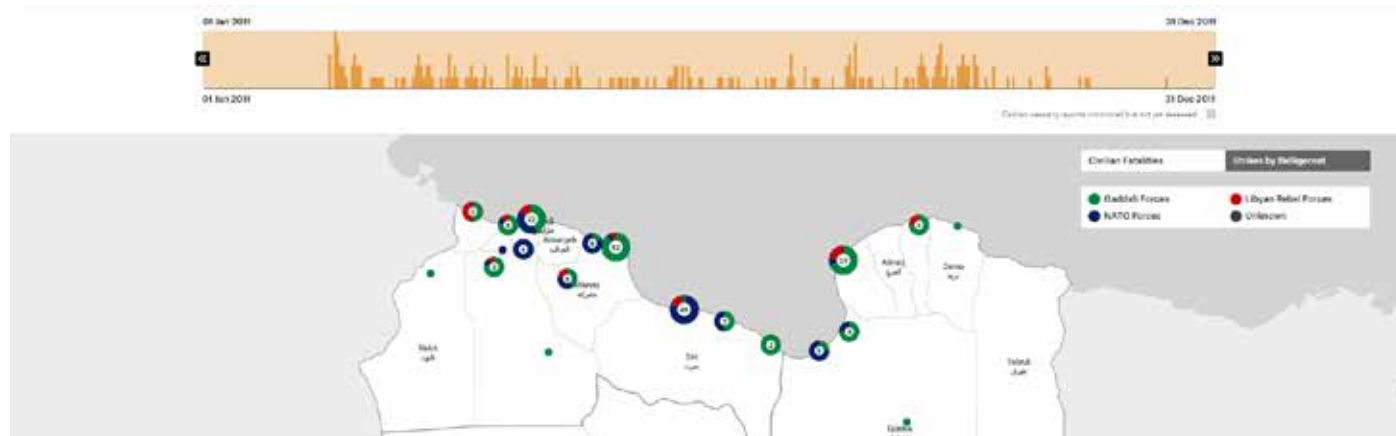
However as the year went on, political division again emerged and the end of the year brought fresh concerns. Presidential elections that had been scheduled for December 24th were delayed indefinitely. This failure risked future political stability in the country, and led to a disturbing increase in tensions that continued into the first months of 2022.

In addition to the regular monitoring of Libya, in March 2021 Airwars [published the first comprehensive open source assessment](#) of all allegations of civilian harm during Libya's eight-month 2011 civil war, from all parties to the fighting. Released to coincide with the 10th anniversary of the Libyan uprising against Muammar Gaddafi and subsequent NATO bombing campaign, it was accompanied by an investigation into the conflict (see Investigations section)

The new database offered a detailed insight into the fierce conflict by tracking reported civilian harm from air and artillery strikes, as well as shocking ground massacres. In total Airwars identified at least [216 incidents](#) of concern in which at least 1,161 civilians were killed. According to the highest estimate, as many as 3,346 civilians were killed in those events.

Of these the majority - at least 925 and as many as 2,132 civilians - were killed by Gaddafi's forces. NATO forces were allegedly responsible for between 238 and 791 fatalities, with rebels locally blamed for between 25 and 107 fatalities.

The actual tally of civilian deaths during the uprising was almost certainly significantly higher than the Airwars study indicates. In 2011, for example, social media use by Libyans was still relatively limited, and independent media in the country was not yet established. Based on Airwars' experience of other conflicts such as Syria, a significant number of local claims of civilian harm made online at the time may also since have been lost, as a result of sites being closed or accounts being shut down.



Even so, the database still represented the most comprehensive account of the civilian impact of the war yet undertaken. The research has since become the de facto basis for estimates of civilian harm during the conflict, and in early 2022 was cited by [Reuters](#), [USA Today](#) and others when debunking allegations about high civilian harm spreading rapidly on social media.

Somalia

Somalia had seen a significant increase both in US airstrikes and in reported civilian harm during Donald Trump's presidency. During 2021 there were no confirmed reports of civilian harm caused by US strikes - although the year did see the continuation of sporadic American strikes on Al-Shabaab and other militant groups.

In total Airwars researchers tracked nineteen claimed US actions during the year, twelve of which were officially confirmed by AFRICOM.

Civilian harm was locally alleged in four of these events, all but one of which had been declared by AFRICOM. The US military command later conceded [injuring civilians in a January 1st incident](#), noting that "U.S. Africa Command assessed that more likely than not, the airstrike inadvertently injured three (3) civilians."

When President Joe Biden assumed office on January 20th 2021 he reportedly issued a six month moratorium on strikes in Somalia and elsewhere. On the first day after that period, July 20th, [AFRICOM carried out a strike](#) on Al-Shabaab militants, reportedly killing 20 fighters. Five US strikes in total were declared by the Biden administration during 2021, each reportedly assisting Somali ground forces, rather than targeting high level al Shabaab commanders.

Yemen

In Yemen, Airwars tracks only the US counter-terrorism campaign against both al Qaeda and ISIS, rather than the ongoing Saudi Arabian-led bombing campaign against Houthi rebels.

The US campaign against Al-Qaeda in Yemen first began in 2002 and has continued sporadically ever since. In total Airwars researchers tracked five local allegations of US actions against Islamist groups during the year, including four potential air or drone strikes - though the circumstances of each were somewhat unclear.

In one incident in March two civilians were reportedly killed in a claimed US strike on a car which also impacted a market. In August Al-Qaeda announced that two of its fighters had been killed in an American raid, but gave no date for when it occurred and Airwars was not able to independently verify any details.

CENTCOM itself said it did not carry out any strikes in Yemen during the year. However this does not preclude the possibility of undeclared strikes carried out by the CIA or other parts of the US state.

Investigations

Principally funded by the Reva and David Logan Foundation, Airwars' investigative team produced a number of exclusive and powerful investigations during 2021, in partnership with key European and US media partners.

Humanising Gaza

In Gaza, the team partnered with The Guardian to interview many residents of a single tower destroyed by the Israel Defense Forces during the May 2021 conflict with Palestinian militants. The Al-Jalaa Tower was ten stories high and housed a number of offices, including those of Associated Press and Al-Jazeera. In addition it was home to dozens of civilians.

The tower's residents were given less than an hour to evacuate by the IDF, meaning they had to abandon their life's possessions. Telling the story of those minutes through recordings on their mobile phones created a visually powerful, [human-focussed story documenting the civilian impact of war](#).

Building on the work of the Research team, the investigations unit worked with Airwars' partner designers at Rectangle to produce an interactive map of all Palestinians civilians killed in Gaza during the 11-day conflict in May 2021. This included dozens of images of victims, as well as links to each individual civilian harm event. [It was described by a New York Times investigator](#) as "one of the most detailed and complete databases of civilian harm in a conflict I've ever seen."

Both the Gaza mapping and the Guardian article were [shortlisted for prizes](#) at the Amnesty Media Awards, a major breakthrough for Airwars. The latter won the award for [Best Use of Digital Media](#).

Countdown to the airstrike: the moment Israeli forces hit al-Jalaa tower, Gaza

First comes the warning call - then the race to evacuate. Residents of a Gaza apartment block recall the frantic minutes before their homes were turned to rubble

Warning: this interactive contains audio, photos and videos that some may find distressing

Global development is supported by

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[About this content](#)

Reporting by **Kaamil Ahmed, Joe Dyke and Anas Baba (in Gaza)**. Interactive by **Garry Blight**

Wed 28 Jul 2021 09:00 BST





Al Karama
حي الكرامة

Al-Shati Camp

مخيم الشاطئ

Al Rimal Al Shumali

الرمال الشمالي

Al Sabra

الصبرة

Al Sheikh Ajleen

الشيخ عجلين

Towsaa Al Nafeez

Gharb Al Salahaddin

توسعة النفوذ غرب صلاح الدين

Al Zeitoun

الزيتون

Madinat Ezahra

مدينة الزهراء

Towsaa Al Nafeez

Sharq Al Salahaddin

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البريج

NEIGHBOURHOOD

Al Zeitoun,

3-4 civilians

4 incidents

Click for more



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الزيتون

killed and 17-39 injured in

more information

Civilian Harm since 9/11

To mark the 20th anniversary of the 9/11 terrorist atrocities and the subsequent launch of the so-called 'Forever Wars', Airwars' investigative unit produced research into the combined civilian impact of two decades of US global military action.

By bringing together civilian harm estimates from organisations including Airwars, Iraq Body Count and UNAMA, the team [produced an estimate of the number of civilians](#) likely killed by US airstrikes since 9/11. This concluded that between 22,000 and 48,000 civilians had been killed directly by US actions, the vast majority in Afghanistan, Iraq and Syria.

Overall, Brown University's Costs of War project estimates that [more than 300,000 civilians](#) have so far been killed overall in those wars unleashed by US actions.

The Airwars research was covered by more than 60 media outlets globally, in at least 10 languages. Among those that reported the figures were [The Guardian](#), The Independent and [NPR](#). The figures were also cited by [Senator Dick Durbin](#) (at 21:00 mins) during his opening remarks as chair of the Senate Judiciary Committee hearing "'Targeted Killing' and the Rule of Law: The Legal and Human Costs of 20 Years of U.S. Drone Strikes", in February 2022.



Holding the Pentagon to account

Airwars' investigations team also required the Pentagon to withdraw and republish its annual report to Congress on civilian harm after uncovering significant flaws. The original annual report had declared responsibility for killing civilians in 11 historic events in Iraq and Syria. By cross checking with Airwars' public record, we uncovered nine incidents which had in fact been carried out by US allies, including Australia, the United Kingdom and Belgium. This equated to the US government officially declaring responsibility for killing 21 civilians it hadn't actually killed, and spoke to wider systemic failings with the US documentation process.

Airwars pointed out the errors to the Department of Defense, which eventually withdrew and republished the report to Congress. The [eventual article](#) detailing the findings was published in The Intercept. "This was an oversight in preparing data for the report," Pentagon spokesperson Mike Howard said, without giving further details on how the error had occurred. "We regret the mistake."

Libya 2011

The team was also able to develop Airwars' research on the Libya 2011 project and add investigative elements. A story about secret negotiations that almost saved Muammar Gaddafi but were scuppered by the United States was featured on the front page of The Independent. Foreign Policy also ran an in-depth article on the findings of the report (see Libya 2011 section above).

During 2021 the unit was able to hire two junior investigators, Imogen Piper and Sanjana Varghese. The two support the senior investigator Joe Dyke. Piper specialises in visual investigations, while Varghese is an experienced writer and dirt-digger.



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the police?

Secret talks that nearly saved Gaddafi



The former Libyan leader was involved in behind-the-scenes negotiations that sought to end the civil war

Oxford Covid vaccine safe, find regulators

UK investigates clots – but rollout will not be paused

**SAMUEL LOVETT
AND STUTI
MISHRA**

The Oxford-AstraZeneca vaccine is safe and can continue to be used to inoculate people, both the UK and EU medicines regulators

have concluded – a joint endorsement that it is hoped will alleviate any lingering concerns around blood clots reported in some recipients of the jab. After a week in which questions were widely raised over the safety of the vaccine, health officials from across the

continent have insisted that the benefits of the jab in preventing Covid-19 far outweigh all associated risks. Speaking at No 10 yesterday, the prime minister, Boris Johnson, confirmed he would receive a first dose of the AstraZeneca vaccine today.

Advocacy

During 2021, Airwars continued to build on its engagement with militaries, governments, and institutions at a broader international level. Our advocacy specialists worked in close coordination with civil society partners and consortiums in the UK, the US, the Netherlands and Belgium to improve national, regional, and international policies, with the aim of better mitigating, accounting for, and investigating instances of civilian harm.

Explosive weapons in populated areas

Throughout 2021, we worked closely with partners to assist the UN-backed drafting of an international political declaration committing to a presumption against the use of explosive weapons in populated areas (EWIPA). In late 2021, Airwars for example worked with civil society organisations in the UK, Belgium and the Netherlands, including as a [member of INEW](#), to support state understanding of the process, and to advocate for them to contribute constructively to the draft protocol.

Among activities, we arranged a panel discussion on the use of EWIPA, entitled “[Debunking ‘collateral damage’](#)” with speakers from leading NGOs, as well as MPs from across Europe, including Belgium and the UK.



United Kingdom

Overall, Airwars continues to rate the UK highly for transparency on its military actions - and extremely poorly on accountability for any associated civilian harm.

A major success for Airwars during the year was to support the Scottish National Party in its development of a forthcoming Protections of Civilians Policy, which we believe will become an essential part of the discourse on protection of civilians within wider UK Parliamentary groups. To our knowledge, the SNP policy represents the most inclusive writing of a national policy on the protection of civilians to date. It is expected to be released in May 2022.

As well as pursuing private engagement with MPs, Airwars took part in various parliamentary activities including an event for UK and US politicians, organised by the APPG on Drone and Modern Conflict with InterAction, to share expertise and key challenges when it comes to accounting for civilian harm in modern conflict with the APPG on Drones and Modern Conflict, and a session on the UK “Conflict Strategy” with the APPG on Global Britain and Modern Conflict.

Netherlands

Along with our Dutch partners, Airwars made significant progress on finalising a two year roadmap process with the Dutch Ministry of Defence, aimed at mitigating future civilian harm events such as Hawijah. Expected to lead to significant improvements to Dutch accountability by creating a structured approach to civilian harm mitigation within the Dutch MoD, the official Roadmap was finally published in April 2022, though not without criticism.

In a parallel process, we have worked closely with partners to pursue transparency and accountability for the Dutch airstrike on Hawija in Iraq in 2015, which led to an estimated 80 civilian fatalities and thousands of destroyed homes and businesses.



Belgium

Belgium remains one of the least accountable European nations on civilian harm resulting from its own actions. Airwars therefore continues to help lead a consortium of Belgian civil society groups focused on the protection of civilians, ensuring thorough coordination. We have mapped parliamentary questions related to our work, and built relationships with MPs who might be helpful to put pressure on the Government and Ministry of Defence to improve both transparency and accountability.

In late 2021, we released a joint open letter with this coalition on the first anniversary of the deployment of four Belgian F16s to Iraq and Syria, calling for increased transparency on civilian casualties

United States

Despite being the most publicly accountable of Western militaries in declaring civilian harm from its own actions, systemic issues continue to impede United States military reporting. Significant improvements have only been achieved as a result of Congressional pressure - often following major media investigations, or through the work of NGOs such as Airwars, CIVIC and Amnesty International.

In the US Airwars continues to be recognised as a leading and trusted resource for independent civilian harm data. Throughout 2021 we held several high level meetings with US legislators. We also engaged directly on civilian harm concerns both with US combatant commands such as CENTCOM and AFRICOM - as well as with senior Pentagon officials at the policy level. We continue to work both unilaterally, and through our membership of InterAction's highly effective Protection of Civilians working group.

During November and December 2021, The New York Times published a series of major investigations related to US military civilian harm processes, culminating in the release of 1,300 previously classified US military internal reviews of civilian harm assessments for Iraq and Syria.

Those previously-secret reports - most responding to initial Airwars assessments of civilian harm in Iraq and Syria - revealed systematic failings in the way civilian harm monitoring and evaluation was conducted by US combatant commands, while also uncovering how parts of the US military sought to silence whistleblowers warning of civilian harm and potential war crimes.

In the wake of these devastating Times reports Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin commissioned a review of US civilian harm policy that is due to report in Summer 2022. Airwars and our US partners are being consulted by Pentagon officials as a part of that process. Separately, we continued to work with senior DoD officials and partners as part of an ongoing Pentagon review of civilian harm assessment processes, which is expected to shortly result in a key Department of Defense Instruction.

Airwars is a collaborative, not for profit watchdog focused on reducing battlefield civilian casualties from explosive weapons use. We track, document and archive local reports of civilian harm in conflict zones, as well as military strike and civilian casualty records.

Presently covering Iraq, Syria, and Libya - as well as US counterterrorism actions in Somalia and Yemen - 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 monitors, journalists, citizens, and state and non-state actors - and leveraging that information for change.

This report was edited by Joe Dyke, with contributions from Shihab Halep, Georgia Edwards, Megan Karlshoej-Pedersen, Clive Vella, Anna Zahn, Adam Gnych, Salim Habib, Emily Tripp and Chris Woods.

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