

“Spontaneous Warfare” against Iraqi and Syrian Civilians: Only Five Percent of British Drone and Air Strikes Are Pre-Planned

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A Freedom of Information request by Drone Wars UK has revealed that only 5% of British air strikes in Iraq and Syria are pre-planned.

According to [the Fol reponse from the Ministry of Defence](#) out of 414 UK air strikes in Iraq and Syria during 2015, 395 were launched under dynamic targeting procedures while just 19 were pre-planned. Dynamic targeting procedures are used when aircraft are already in the air and either ‘targets of opportunity’ are spotted or strikes are launched in defence of troops on the ground during direct combat.

As dynamically targeted strikes are launched in a short-time frame and without pre-planning it is generally recognised that such strikes are more likely to injure civilians than those that are pre-planned. Pre-planning of strikes gives time to assess possible dangers to civilians and enable strikes to be launched in a way that can minimise such danger. According to [US doctrine documents](#) “dynamic targeting occurs in a much compressed timeline... [which] may require that targeting be completed in minutes.”



The Ministry of Defence continues to insist that there is no evidence that any of [the UK's 845 air strikes](#) launched since September 2014 in Iraq and Syria have killed or injured civilians. Casualty reporting organisations however report that hundreds of civilians have been killed in Coalition air strikes. Airwars, which tracks strikes in Iraq and Syria [reported this week](#) that more than 1,300 civilians have been killed in Coalition air strikes.

British drone and air strikes in Iraq and Syria 2015*

Target as described by MoD	Reaper Drone	Tornado or Typhoon	Total
ISIL position/building	38	59	97
Vehicle	41	13	54
Mortar or machine gun position	10	82	92
Attacking group or terrorist group	40	55	95
Armed pick-up truck	6	8	14
Armoured Personnel Carrier (APC)	9	13	22
Engineering vehicles	10	12	22
ISIL complex or bunker or logistics hub	1	18	19
Heavy weapons (e.g. artillery or anti-aircraft gun)	5	14	19
Storage compound or weapons cache	11	9	20
ISIL Checkpoint	10	2	12
Individuals laying IEDs/IEDs	6	1	7
Vehicle-borne IED	13	3	16
IED factory	1	1	2
Sniper	2	11	13
Barricades or defences	1	3	4
Boat	1	0	1
Oilfield infrastructure	0	16	16
Not given	0	2	2
Total	205	322	527

* Data from UK MoD's 'Update: air strikes in Iraq and Syria' web page

While there are likely to be a large number of dynamic strikes during a conventional 'hot battlefield' situation such as that taking place in Iraq and Syria, that fact that only 5% of UK strikes are pre-planned is extremely surprising. As if to pre-empt questions, in its response letter the MoD argues that

prioritisation of providing close air support to partner forces on the ground can result in a high proportion of strikes being dynamic. The UK has some of the most capable air assets, which can result in the allocation of dynamic targets to UK assets, freeing up other nations' aircraft to prosecute pre-planned deliberate targets.

However our analysis of UK strikes in Iraq and Syria (from the MoD's regular updates) show that many of the strikes cannot be classified as close air support strikes.

Deaths from dynamic strike

An important [investigation](#) published in last week's Washington Post illustrates clearly how dynamic strikes can kill civilians without those undertaking such strikes being aware of the impact on the ground. On 13 March 2015 US aircraft were sent to strike an Islamic checkpoint near Mosul, a dynamic targeting mission, according to a subsequent [Centcom report](#).

According to the Washington Post, the pilots were about to strike the checkpoint when two vehicles stopped and those inside begin talking to the guards. The article goes on:

Running low on fuel and time, the pilots concluded that the people in the cars were allied with the militants and asked for permission to strike. After a brief discussion with their headquarters in Qatar, they got their reply: "You're

cleared to execute.”

The pilots later report that the guard shack was flattened, two vehicles destroyed and four enemy fighters killed.

Two weeks later however an email arrived at the US embassy from Raja’a Zidan al-Ekabee, an Iraqi woman who owned one of the cars, reporting civilian casualties and requesting compensation for her destroyed car. She had fled Mosul earlier and was paying a driver to undertake the dangerous job of bringing the car out of the area. Apparently the driver brought fleeing civilians along in the car which was travelling with a second car also filled with escaping civilians.

The US military investigated the report and, according to the Washington Post identified a “communications error” during the hurried conversations between the pilots and their headquarters. After reviewing the video, the US changed the final casualty count of the strike to “four enemy fighters and four civilians.”

However the four civilian casualties accepted by the US under counts the actual number of civilian deaths. According to the [Washington Post](#), which interviewed surviving family members (including a lieutenant colonel with the Iraqi police) and local officials, eleven civilians actually died in the strike, including five children, four women and two male civilian drivers. It should be noted that no compensation was paid to Ekabee. An email from the US military stated that she was not entitled to compensation as the car was destroyed in “combat activity.” Separately, family members of the civilian victims did not as yet claim compensation.

Here in the UK, the bullish tone around the precision of UK air strikes and the lack of civilian casualties from UK strikes appears to be being modified. In his latest [quarterly statement](#) to parliament on the campaign, Defence Secretary Michael Fallon argued that while the UK takes “very good care” to minimise civilian casualties, “in the messiness of war it is not impossible that there may be civilian casualties at some point”. Later in response to questions, he accepted that “it will be more and more difficult to ensure that we avoid civilian casualties” in areas of intense fighting, a reference no doubt to the coming heavy strikes on Mosul and Raqqa.

While some will accept such casualties as the price ‘we’ (sic) have to pay to tackle ISIS, a brief read through the [hundreds of individual human stories of those killed in Coalition airstrikes](#) compiled by Airwars should give all serious pause for thought.

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