

# Why the face of Western war gives us a false idea of conflict

March 20 2018, by Sten Rynning

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The US-led global coalition fighting Islamic State has, with success, robbed the terrorist movement of its territorial safe havens. But when it comes to facing war's brutal nature, the West fumbles the football. It habitually reports (close to) zero civilian casualties from its actions, which is questionable. It should be a cause of reflection on why Western societies believe war can be painless.

The [New York Times](#) reported in late 2017 that the US system intended to minimise civilian casualties from airstrikes is "at least partly, an illusion". A systematic ground-based investigation by the newspaper found the loss of civilian life from air strikes to be 31 times higher than official accounts. The [British Royal Air Force](#) had, by this time, dropped more than 3,400 bombs and yet claimed "no evidence" of civilian casualties. Meanwhile, in France, the daily [Libération](#) reported that the French Ministry of Defence admitted to at least 1,300 strikes but no civilian casualties. My own ongoing investigation of Coalition strikes releases, casualty reports, and occasional [press releases](#) shows how the Coalition's campaign narrative is all about accuracy: that in 2015, 6,052 strikes resulted in just 81 [civilian casualties](#) (in both Iraq and Syria).

Evidence of civilian suffering, including casualties resulting from the use of armed force, is not hard to come by. The [Human Rights Watch annual report](#) of 2018 cites a total death toll of 400,000 civilians, including 2,286 deaths resulting from Western airstrikes. [The United Nations Iraq](#) summary of civilians killed and injured depicts a horrendous pace with hundreds of civilians killed and injured every month. The [Action on](#)

[Armed Violence](#) group reported an increase of more than 50% in [civilian deaths](#) from explosive weapons in Syria and Iraq in 2017.

## **Depends how you count**

The US-led coalition explains low numbers with reference to extraordinary precautions taken to ensure no or very limited harm to civilians from air strikes. According to international law, armed forces are allowed to pursue "military advantage" as long as the pursuit does not involve any excessive "incidental loss of civilian life", civilian injury or damage to civilian objects. The [coalition claims](#) its assets performing "analysis" (intelligence gathering, including regarding the risk of excessive loss of civilian life) outweigh strike assets by a ratio of 5-1 or sometimes 10-1. In other words, the targeting policy is restrictive and carefully thought out and executed.

Admittedly, the Pentagon has conceded that casualty numbers do, on occasion, rise. While observers tend to attribute rising casualties to the more warlike rhetoric emanating from the Trump White House and the leeway president Trump has offered military field commanders in the fight against IS, the Pentagon itself points to the increased complexity of urban battlefields.

And it is true that urban warfare picked up in late 2016 and raged through 2017 when the Coalition took on the two main IS strongholds, first Mosul and then Raqqa. Not coincidentally, but rather in anticipation of the scrutiny under which these urban campaigns would be put, as one centrally placed source told me, the global coalition began issuing monthly civilian casualty reports from November 2016. This was the Coalition admitting that ad hoc press releases covering mostly US strikes did not cut it. Civilian casualties had to be examined in a more forthright manner.

Still, there is no question that coalition authorities approach evidence of casualties in a way that pulls its reporting downwards toward low numbers. The coalition distinguishes between "credible" and "non-credible" reporting of casualties – with most of this reporting coming from the NGO and transparency project [Air Wars](#). Using its own data and imagery, the Coalition either gives credence to these reports or not. So, [in November 2017, it found](#) 55 such reports insufficiently credible while it deemed credible another five reports involving the unintentional deaths of 15 civilians.

If certainty is the yard stick, a lot of information from such a violent, complex, and often inaccessible battlefield will necessarily be discarded. And certainty is what the military is looking for, as it reports the bad outcomes of its actions. Preliminary findings from my research also show that while the United States every now and then does report casualties, European and other partners tend to report none at all.

## **You get what you ask for**

The character of war follows the character of society, Carl von Clausewitz, a famed military theorist, once argued. This seems to me to be a fundamental point here: Western militaries pretend to fight the war that Western societies expect – war not as war but armed surgery to deliver us painlessly from evil. Ultimately, of course, this modern, liberal expectation that war can be controlled makes it easier to choose war. And every time the West does choose it, the military will seek to deliver what it expects.

What perhaps especially Europe lacks is a robust politico-strategic understanding of combat as war, not some sort of surgical "intervention" or "crisis operation". War is violent and resists political control, especially from those who fail to recognise the nature of the beast. Regrettably, the point seems lost on Western governments.

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