Enumerating Civilian Harm: Experience, Ethics, and Erasure

Thomas Gregory, Craig Jones, Helen M. Kinsella, Nisha Shah, and Lina Aburas

Numbers [are…] essential and insufficient, dehumanizing and reparative, necessary and complicated.
—Diane Nelson, *Who Counts?*[1]

On December 18, 2021, the *New York Times* released more than 1,300 declassified civilian harm assessments from Combined Joint Task Force —Operation Inherent Resolve (CJTF-OIR), which were obtained through several Freedom of Information Act requests and subsequent lawsuits.[2] The files run to more than 5,400 pages and contain various CJTF-OIR memoranda instructing officials to evaluate and enumerate coalition-caused civilian casualties.[3] The documents also contain over 1,300 classified assessments that CJTF-OIR officials conducted into coalition airstrikes in Syria and Iraq between 2014 and 2018, including 216 civilian harm claims that coalition officials deemed credible and more than 1,100 cases that the coalition dismissed as non-credible. These confidential assessments served as the basis for the numerical information that the

Thomas Gregory, University of Auckland, Auckland, New Zealand (t.gregory@auckland.ac.nz)

Craig Jones, Newcastle University, Newcastle upon Tyne, United Kingdom (craig.jones@ncl.ac.uk; craig.jones@-newcastle.ac.uk)

Helen Kinsella, University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, Minnesota, United States (kins0017@umn.edu)

Nisha Shah, University of Ottawa, Ottawa, Ontario, Canada (nisha.shah@uottawa.ca)

Lina Aburas, University of Ottawa, Ottawa, Ontario, Canada (laburasa@uottawa.ca; laburo91@uottawa.ca)

Ethics & International Affairs, 40, no. 1 (2026), pp. 51–77.
© The Author(s), 2026. Published by Cambridge University Press on behalf of Carnegie Council for Ethics in International Affairs. This is an Open Access article, distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike licence (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0), which permits non-commercial re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the same Creative Commons licence is used to distribute the re-used or adapted article and the original article is properly cited. The written permission of Cambridge University Press or the rights holder(s) must be obtained prior to any commercial use.
doi:10.1017/S0892679426100446

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0892679426100446 Published online by Cambridge University Press

CJTF-OIR released in its Monthly Civilian Casualty Reports, which claim that at least 1,395 civilians were killed and more than 353 civilians were injured during this period.[4]

Casualty figures are essential to the ethical and legal debates surrounding armed conflict.[5] These counts provide the "raw material" necessary to evaluate specific strikes and determine whether civilian impact remains within acceptable legal bounds. However, counting casualties is rarely straightforward. Azmat Khan—who led the *New York Times* investigation—noted that the confidential assessments revealed a startling disconnect between coalition *promises* and coalition *practices*, with flawed intelligence and failed targeting causing considerable harm to Syrian and Iraqi civilians.[6] At the same time, she also argued that the confidential assessments raise concerns about how CJTF-OIR officials count civilian casualties and whether this information is being used to hold the CJTF-OIR accountable when civilians are harmed. She discovered cases that were dismissed because CJTF-OIR officials had misread coordinates, mistranslated locations, or missed important evidence.[7] Moreover, she noted that the confidential assessments seemed not to hold the coalition accountable: no wrongdoing is identified, no disciplinary action is recommended, and fewer than 12 percent of assessments recommend further investigation.[8]

In our contribution to this special section, we will examine coalition efforts to enumerate civilian harms, focusing specific attention on the rationale behind the count, the policies that outline why and how the count should be conducted, and how the count was actually conducted. Numerical information is often seen as essential in ethical debates because it supplies the raw material that is required to ascertain what is happening and whether it is acceptable.[9] In armed conflicts, accurate casualty figures are considered a critical tool when it comes to accounting for the harms inflicted upon civilians, so that militaries can be held accountable if these harms violate established norms and laws.[10] While we agree that these numbers are indispensable, we will also contend that these numbers are not sufficient when it comes to ethical considerations because this numerical information tells us little about how civilians experience these harms. Moreover, we will argue that the categories used to enumerate civilian casualties can work to conceal the indirect, cumulative, and reverberating harms that civilians experience—such as long-term injuries, exposure to infectious diseases, and damage to the built environment—that can be much harder to measure.

The first section will outline the rationale behind the CJTF-OIR counting, drawing on the declassified documents to show that coalition officials were more

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0892679426100446 Published online by Cambridge University Press

concerned with military success than civilian protection. The second section will outline how the CJTF-OIR counted civilian casualties, focusing specific attention on the categories used to organize this information. In addition to undercounting civilian casualties, we will argue that the coalition's counting methods imposed a narrow understanding of what counts as civilian harm. Our final section will turn to a different count, assessed by the pre-eminent London-based not-for-profit organization Airwars and also conducted during this conflict. In contrast to the coalition, which prioritized martial considerations above ethical concerns, Airwars orients tracking and enumerating civilian casualties in order to hold militaries more accountable. Furthermore, we will outline how Airwars foregrounds the narratives behind these numbers to outline how civilians experience various wartime harms. Our contention that numbers are necessary but insufficient shifts the focus to victim-centered narratives, which can be used to contest a dehumanizing logic that reduces civilians to mere statistics, enabling a more relational response to the harms inflicted on the civilian population.

Ethics and Enumeration

Various moral norms and legal codes regulate the violence inflicted in armed conflict, including specific rules that are supposed to protect the civilian population.[11] Article 51 of the Additional Protocols to the Geneva Conventions, for example, stipulates that "the civilian population as such, as well as individual civilians, shall not be the object of attacks."[12] Article 51 also prohibits indiscriminate attacks that are not directed at a specific military objective, as well as attacks that are "expected to cause incidental loss of civilian life… which would be excessive in relation to the concrete and direct military advantage anticipated."[13] In addition, Article 57 stipulates that belligerents should take constant care during planning and executing an attack to spare the civilian population, including doing everything feasible to verify that their targets are legitimate and "tak[ing] all feasible precautions in the choice of means and methods of attack with a view to avoiding, and in any event to minimizing, incidental loss of civilian life, injury to civilians and damage to civilian objects."[14] There is also a broad consensus within the literature on civilian harm that counting casualties is essential when it comes to observing possible violations of international humanitarian law and ensuring that militaries can be held accountable when civilians are harmed. After all, we cannot be certain that belligerents are discriminating between combatants and noncombatants when

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0892679426100446 Published online by Cambridge University Press

directing their attacks and ensuring that the incidental harm to civilians is not disproportionate to the anticipated gains if it is unclear whether civilians were harmed in an attack, and how many civilians were harmed.[15]

While international humanitarian law does not require belligerents to count civilian casualties, several theorists have raised concerns when belligerents refuse to do so, warning that belligerents might be seeking to obfuscate the harm inflicted on civilians in order to camouflage immoral or unlawful actions, including possible war crimes.[16] Other theorists have suggested that this reluctance further indicates that belligerents do not value the lives that have been extinguished.[17] When belligerents have refused to count civilian casualties, external organizations have often intervened to document and disseminate this information, with several organizations collaborating to create standards for recording civilian casualties and to harmonize data collection across different organizations and different conflicts.[18]

This section will argue that militaries have tended to prioritize martial considerations above moral considerations when counting civilian casualties, often using these figures for consequence management rather than holding themselves accountable.[19] In 2008, for example, the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in Afghanistan established a Civilian Casualty Tracking Cell (CCTC) to collate information from the various regional commands in a centralized spreadsheet.[20] Yet there was a martial imperative underpinning this endeavor: maximizing the effectiveness of the attacks. ISAF officials were not concerned with civilian harm *per se* but with the risk that civilian harm could become an impediment to mission success.[21] Anxious that civilian casualties were alienating the local population, ISAF officials imposed several restrictions on combat operations to minimize civilian casualties alongside several post-incident consequence management techniques, which included *ex-gratia* payments to Afghan civilians (or their surviving family members) and official apologies.[22] CCTC data was essential to these consequence management techniques because it enabled ISAF officials to respond to allegations it considered to be credible and to refute allegations it considered to be noncredible.[23] In their directives, ISAF officials were clear that the purpose of counting civilian casualties was not focused on making the coalition more accountable.[24] As General David Petraeus explained, "Every Afghan civilian death diminishes our cause. If we use excessive force or operate contrary to our counterinsurgency principles, tactical victories may prove to be strategic setbacks."[25]

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0892679426100446 Published online by Cambridge University Press

CJTF-OIR officials were also keen to count civilian casualties ("CIVCAS") during Operation Inherent Resolve and ascribed particular importance to consequence management in their policies on reporting and responding to this harm. On September 27, 2017, CJTF-OIR officials circulated a memorandum warning that "the incidence of CIVCAS can… temper or completely blunt the benefit of counterterrorism efforts [because…] both credible and not credible CIVCAS allegations can harm the relationship between coalition forces, the civilian population, and host-nation governments, and can negatively impact national and international opinion."[26] The memorandum argues that CJTF-OIR officials require timely and accurate information on civilian casualties so that the coalition can begin a "consequence management [process…] to mitigate the impact of CIVCAS on the civilian population, the international community, and the mission."[27] The memorandum outlines the reporting procedures that coalition units are expected to follow to ensure that CJTF-OIR officials receive the information that is needed. It stipulates that coalition units have twenty-four hours to submit a First Impressions Report (FIR) when civilian casualties are suspected to ensure that CJTF-OIR officials have basic information about potential incidents. After receiving the initial allegation, the CIVCAS cell—similar to the CCTC established in Afghanistan—must complete an Initial Assessment (IA) to determine whether the claim is credible.[28] The memorandum instructs CIVCAS cell officials to consult coalition strike logs when conducting their IA to confirm whether CJTF-OIR actions were conducted at this time and at those coordinates. CIVCAS cell officials can recommend closure in their IA if there are no corroborating actions in the strike logs or if "the allegation provides insufficient information as to time, location and detail."[29]

When CIVCAS cell officials *can* locate a corroborating strike in the coalition logs, the command responsible for conducting the strike is required to complete a more detailed CIVCAS Credibility Assessment Report (CCAR), which should state whether the claim is considered credible and outline how this determination has been reached.[30] The CJTF-OIR memorandum outlines the criteria that should be used to assess claims, stating that claims should be listed as credible "if the [Action Officer] determines, based on all reasonably available information, that it is more likely than not that a civilian was killed or injured as a result of coalition action."[31] It states that all individuals in the strike area *should* be listed as civilians "unless positively identified otherwise"—but the memorandum does not outline the criteria that should be used to make a positive identification, or even define who

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0892679426100446 Published online by Cambridge University Press

qualifies as a civilian.[32] The standing definition that coalition troops are supposed to use when determining status is a "person who is *not* a member of the military and who is *not* taking a direct part in hostilities against a party to the conflict in an armed conflict."[33] Yet several commentators have warned that the negative definition means that other demographic markers—including race, gender, and age—are often invoked in practice to differentiate between combatants and noncombatants (see below).[34] Once the CCAR is complete, consequence management can begin: the CJTF-OIR Public Affairs Office may choose to issue a statement confirming or disputing the allegation and, if necessary, *ex-gratia* payments can be disbursed to the victims.[35]

While there are provisions in the memorandum that allow a commander to initiate an internal investigation, as noted above, only a minimal number—fewer than 12 percent—resulted in disciplinary action.[36] This further highlights the tendency to use investigations in ways that seek to bolster the legitimacy of coalition violence, even justifying civilian casualties that might have resulted. Shaped by operational concerns and avoiding the strategic set back of "losing hearts and minds," the effort to assess casualties was more directly related to ensuring that from a military perspective, civilian casualties were minimized to ensure support by the civilian population for coalition activities. In other words, the emphasis in coalition assessments was to ensure that violence was used in ways that mounting civilian casualties would not derail the mission.[37] As Thomas Gregory has argued elsewhere, the impetus was less a humanitarian goal than a martial one to determine how force could be optimized—minimizing civilian casualties in circumstances where they could derail international and local support for the mission.[38]

This emphasis on martial—rather than moral—considerations is also apparent in the CJTF-OIR Monthly Civilian Casualty Reports. Unlike classified CCARs, these monthly reports are issued as press releases and intended for public consumption. Each report follows the same basic format, listing the various allegations that coalition officials have assessed to be credible or noncredible alongside other numerical information, including the square kilometers and approximate population "liberated… from Daesh oppression."[39] Coalition officials also used these monthly reports to reiterate their commitment to minimizing civilian casualties.[40] Although the CCARs submitted to the CIVCAS cell contain detailed information about what happened during these attacks, the monthly statements released to the public resorted to boilerplate language with sparse details about individual cases.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0892679426100446 Published online by Cambridge University Press

For example, the classified CCAR on a strike in Mosul—which was conducted on January 13, 2016—describes how four adults and four children were observed moving in the rubble after the "first munition detonated on the target building [but…] following the detonation of the second munition, only three persons can be observed moving in the vicinity of the target and it is likely that although they survived [these persons…] were injured as a consequence of the strike."[41] The CCAR also contains nine redacted images from the strike, a link to a shared drive with the full-motion video, and extracts from the chat logs where individuals involved in the attack discuss what they think they are seeing on their screens.[42] None of these details are evident in the CJTF-OIR "Monthly Civilian Casualty Report," which simply states that "during a strike on ISIS fighters in a house it was assessed that eight civilians were unintentionally killed [and that…] during post-strike video analysis civilians were identified near the house who were not evident prior to the strike."[43]

Likewise, another confidential CCAR describes an airstrike on a suspected ISIS machine gun position located in a residential building, which was conducted on May 15, 2017.[44] The CCAR notes that local residents contacted the Joint Coalition Coordination Center in Erbil to report that five civilians were inside an adjacent building when the target was struck and that three perished in the attack. The CCAR describes—in quite graphic detail—how falling rubble trapped the victims inside their basement and how survivors used mobile phones to request assistance. Iraqi authorities were unable to provide assistance as ISIS militants were still in the area but "some neighbors… heard their cries and on or about 18 May were able to rescue two of the civilians."[45] The CCAR notes that three civilians died in the attack, stating that "dehydration was likely the principal cause of death given that they were trapped in hot conditions for over 72 hours."[46] These more distressing details were omitted from the CJTF-OIR "Monthly Civilian Casualty Report," which covers the entire incident in a single sentence: "during a strike on an ISIS fighting position, it was assessed that three civilians in a building adjacent to the target building were unintentionally killed."[47] The confidential CCARs tend to contain a much richer narrative about each incident while the Monthly Civilian Casualty Reports, which are intended for public consumption, are largely concerned with reporting the statistics, stripping individual accounts down to the bare minimum—often a few vague, non-descriptive, and sanitized sentences—in order to extract the basic numerical information.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0892679426100446 Published online by Cambridge University Press

These figures allow CJTF-OIR officials to collate the information into several broad categories: the number of reports that (i) have been received, (ii) have been assessed, (iii) the coalition considers to be credible, (iv) the coalition considers to be non-credible, and (v) still need to be assessed.[48] One problem with these short, itemized summaries is that the more distressing details tend to disappear from view because there is no discussion about how the victims experienced the harms inflicted upon them. Another problem is that CJTF-OIR officials were able to use these reports to reaffirm their commitment to civilian protection without reflection on their conduct in individual cases, including cases where mistaken judgements directly led to the killing of civilians. While it is reasonable to expect monthly reports to present more of an overview than an in-depth analysis of specific cases, our argument is that these reports fail to communicate the moral gravity and gruesome reality of killing civilians. Taken as a whole, the monthly reports thus also undermine public faith in the process of counting and reporting civilian casualties, especially as they systematically omit questions of accountability and disciplinary action. For example, the section on credible incidents in the "Monthly Civilian Casualty Report" often began with a generic statement insisting that coalition strikes were lawful, with the CJTF-OIR taking "all feasible precautions… to reduce the risk of harm to civilians."[49]

The itemized summaries then follow the same basic technical format, listing the date, the location, and the target before stating that the incidental harm to civilians was regrettable but unintentional.[50] Again, no mention is made of specific accountability mechanisms or instances where disciplinary action has been taken. This raises some important questions about the relationship between ethics and enumeration because the existing literature assumes that counting civilian casualties can help to ensure that militaries are held more accountable for their actions, but CJTF-OIR counts seemed to be more concerned with legitimizing coalition violence than interrogating possible problems.[51] When considering efforts to enumerate civilian casualties, it is important that we remain attentive to the rationale behind these counts because we might discover, as this section has shown, that certain counts prioritize martial considerations above moral considerations.

Enumeration and Erasure

Whereas the previous section focused more on the rationale behind these counts, this section will detail the mundane processes and practices that CJTF-OIR officials

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0892679426100446 Published online by Cambridge University Press

use to enumerate the harm inflicted upon civilians to trace how these bureaucratic procedures circumscribe what casualties are counted and how these casualties are counted.[52] We focus specifically on the categories that CJTF-OIR officials have used to count civilian casualties to show how these categories work to render certain harms more visible while erasing other civilian harms from view. One way to illustrate this issue is to draw attention to discrepancies between different counts. According to CJTF-OIR estimates, coalition forces have killed 1,454 civilians and wounded 402 civilians across 360 separate incidents since the conflict commenced.[53] Airwars numbers are markedly different from those of CJTF-OIR. It estimates that coalition forces have killed more than 8,222 civilians and wounded at least 5,906 civilians across 2,985 separate incidents, which suggests that civilian deaths are five times higher than coalition estimates and civilian injuries are nearly fifteen times higher.[54] The stark difference between the Airwars estimate and the coalition count owes to significant methodological and interpretational differences.

Airwars monitors open-source information, including social media and local news sources, to identify civilian harm claims, which it then cross-references with other sources in order to provide a provisional assessment. Allegations are graded as "confirmed" when a specific belligerent has accepted responsibility for harm to noncombatants in a specific incident. Allegations are graded as "fair" when there is a reasonable level of public reporting on an alleged incident from two or more credible sources. All sources agree on what happened and this is often coupled with detailed biographical, photographic, or video evidence. Crucially, this grading also "includes likely or confirmed actions by a belligerent in the near vicinity for the date in question."[55] Allegations are graded as "weak" when the allegation is based on a single—albeit reputable—source (with biographical details and visual evidence) *and* it has been confirmed that international strikes were taking place in that area and on the date in question. Airwars grades allegations as "contested" when there is a reasonable level of public reporting but there are disagreements about who is responsible for the attack or how the harm to civilians occurred. Airwars "discounts" those claims when its researchers can demonstrate that the victims were combatants rather than noncombatants, no other parties were responsible for inflicting this harm, or that no civilians were harmed in this incident.[56] Its published figures—including those listed above—are limited to incidents that have been confirmed or assessed as fair. It is also important to note that referrals from Airwars triggered approximately 70 percent of the coalition assessments conducted

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0892679426100446 Published online by Cambridge University Press

during Operation Inherent Resolve, including 40 percent that the coalition listed as credible.[57]

Both counts raise important epistemic questions about how civilian harm is enumerated—how it is counted, how it is categorized, and how it is communicated—and how the different methodologies that have been developed to count civilian casualties delimit which civilian casualties are counted.[58] Yet there are also significant differences in motivation. Coalition officials were counting civilian casualties to assist with consequence management, using this information in an effort to prevent civilian casualties becoming an impediment to mission success. Airwars counts civilian casualties because it wants "to reliably and independently document the human cost of war in order to promote a more peaceful world where human lives are acknowledged and taken into account."[59] Airwars is a member of the Casualty Recorders Network, which was established to develop and disseminate clear standards for recording casualties to ensure that all conflict-related deaths are recognized.[60] Airwars uses its civilian harm data to ensure belligerents acknowledge the full human toll their actions take on the civilian population and have measures in place to minimize human suffering while providing victims with tools to hold belligerents accountable for their actions.[61] We will return to the divergent motivations that underpin these counts in a moment, but for the time being we want to focus on how methodological differences determine whether specific casualties will be counted and how these casualties are categorized, and how these methodological differences can result in significant discrepancies between the different counts.

In some cases, these discrepancies result from simple errors. The *New York Times* reviewed the 1,300 confidential assessments that it obtained from the Pentagon and discovered that basic errors were concerningly common in the coalition count. There were cases where officials muddled coordinates, misspelt names, and ignored conflicting evidence.[62] For example, one allegation was dismissed as non-credible on the grounds that:

> The geographic locations of "Siha" and "Bawabat Al Sham" do not correlate with known districts of West Mosul or the surrounding area. In the absence of further particularizing information or evidence, this allegation should be treated as not having the potential to be credible.[63]

However, reporters from the *New York Times* were able to locate the west Mosul neighborhood using a tool as simple as Google Maps, with a slight spelling variation

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0892679426100446 Published online by Cambridge University Press

("Sihah" rather than "Siha").[64] Although CJTF-OIR officials have not commented on specific errors that have been identified in these reports, they have acknowledged that there might be some mistakes and inconsistences in their database and have committed to working alongside external organizations—like Airwars—to correct these mistakes.[65]

It would, however, be a mistake to think that the sizeable discrepancies between the different datasets can fully be attributed to specific mistakes in individual assessments. As noted above regarding Airwars, discrepancies are often the result of significant methodological differences, which has a significant bearing on how these counts are conducted.[66] Ryan Goodman, for example, argues that the "implausibly low number of civilians that the Pentagon admits to killing in Iraq and Syria [reveals…] a fundamental flaw in the way the United States military screens claims of civilian casualties."[67] Goodman argues that there are several factors that might explain these discrepancies, including the fact that CJTF-OIR officials lack on-the-ground access to the blast site. He also claims that the evidential threshold required to initiate a CCAR is too high, warning that the coalition is "obviously going to miss a multitude of cases in which civilians were killed." As an initial screening device, he concludes, this threshold has become a "stunning, systemic flaw."[68] Likewise, when Airwars compared these classified assessments against its own internal archive, it discovered several instances when CJTF-OIR officials had requested information from Airwars to assist with their investigations but then proceeded to ignore this information, even when it came with precise coordinates, satellite images, and witness testimonies.[69]

In her book *The Seductions of Quantification: Measuring Human Rights, Gender Violence, and Sex Trafficking*, Sally Engle Merry suggests that numerical "indicators are appealing because they claim to stand above politics, offering rational, technical knowledge that is… objective, scientific, and transparent."[70] Although this statistical information might sound attractive, she warns that the "process of translating the buzzing confusion of social life into neat categories that can be tabulated risks distorting the complexity of social phenomenon, [stripping them…] of their context, history, and meaning."[71] Despite promising objective statistical information, she argues that quantification fails in at least two specific ways. On the one hand, it camouflages the political considerations that shape what information is collected and how this information is presented, including the social processes involved in constructing the categories used to organize this information.[72] As she explains, "Rather than objective representations of the

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0892679426100446 Published online by Cambridge University Press

world, such quantifications are social constructs formed through protracted social processes of consensus building and contestation."[73] On the other hand, she argues that quantification conceals the interpretative work that goes into deciding whether a specific incident should be included in the count and how this item should be categorized. She warns that "the ambiguity of the categories, errors in counting, missing data, and lack of commensurability disappear in the final presentation."[74] Her work is useful when it comes to thinking about the CIVCAS cell data collected during Operation Inherent Resolve because it enables us to draw attention to how the categories CJTF-OIR created to organize the information flowing into their spreadsheets delimit what civilian harms are legible as civilian harms—what can be counted and what will remain uncountable.[75]

In order to understand how the coalition enumerated civilian harm, we examined both the CJTF-OIR policies that governed how these counts ought to be conducted alongside the CCARs that show how these policies were enacted. We focused specific attention on the categories that the CJTF-OIR constructed to collate the information that was flowing into CIVCAS cell spreadsheets and the interpretative work that went into categorizing specific incidents. In the previous section, we introduced the CJTF-OIR memorandum outlining the rationale behind the coalition count, but the memorandum also outlines the definitions that CJTF-OIR officials should use when assessing claims. The CJTF-OIR memorandum outlines what constitutes a CIVCAS, defining it as "the death or injury of a civilian, who has not lost [their] protected status."[76] The memorandum also defines what can cause a CIVCAS, limiting it to "direct military action, to include Close Air Support (CAS), Close Combat Aviation (CCA), Direct Fire (DF), Indirect Fire (IDF), and other actions *directly* linked to security operations."[77] In doing so, the memorandum limits civilian harm to isolated moments when specific civilians were killed or wounded as a direct consequence of identifiable coalition attacks, which obscures the indirect, reverberating, and cumulative harms that are connected to the conflict but cannot be directly linked to specific attacks.[78] As we show below, these definitions are not neutral, but have a significant bearing on *which* harms can be enumerated and how. As Derek Gregory puts it, "Spaces of constructed visibility are also always spaces of constructed invisibility."[79]

The memorandum also seeks to redraw the distinction between combatants and noncombatants, reminding us that these categories are not fixed and stable entities with clear and consistent definitions.[80] The CJTF-OIR memorandum defines the

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0892679426100446 Published online by Cambridge University Press

civilian in negative terms, as "persons who are *not* combatants [or taking…] direct part in hostilities."[81] Yet, the memorandum then supplements this basic definition in the template for CIVCAS cell officials to use when reviewing specific incidents. The template suggests that CIVCAS cell officials compare the "slant" identified in the pre-strike collateral damage estimate with the "slant" that is visible in the post-strike video footage. It is written as three numbers separated with slashes (hence, the term "slant")—the first indicating adult males, the second indicating adult females, and the third indicating children (for example: "3/1/2").[82] As Helen M. Kinsella explains, the distinction between combatants and noncombatants is often secured with reference to gendered and racialized assumptions about who is innocent and who is involved, with adult males categorized as combatants and adult females categorized as noncombatants—irrespective of their actual status.[83] One particular problem with this simplistic "slant" approach is that all adult males are at serious risk of being considered combatants merely because of their perceived age and gender—and if they are considered combatants they would never be counted as civilians even when their status is merely inferred rather than concretely known. In this respect, the slant does much more than *describe* who is a combatant and who is a noncombatant: it *produces* certain populations as combatants and noncombatants, which has a significant bearing on how individuals are categorized in the coalition counts.[84] Discussions in the CCARs also reveal the ambiguities that haunt these categories, with officials unclear whether adolescents should be categorized as adults or children.[85] None of this is visible in the Monthly Civilian Casualty Reports because all these doubts and uncertainties—which amount to potentially thousands of civilian lives extinguished—tend to disappear in the final presentation.[86]

Critics have suggested that such methodological flaws and definitional deficiencies result in the CIVCAS cell *under*counting civilian casualties, leading to sizable discrepancies between coalition and non-coalition figures.[87] In addition to the above, Oona Hathaway and Azmat Khan have identified problems with CJTF-OIR reporting policies and practices, including an over-reliance on low-quality video footage, access to incomplete or inaccurate strike logs, insufficient linguistic and cultural expertise on the target area, and a reluctance to reassess cases when new evidence emerges.[88] In her reporting for the *New York Times*, Khan discovered cases that were dismissed as non-credible because the casualties were not visible in the overhead reconnaissance footage because the victims were buried in the rubble or concealed under the smoke, both of which are common following aerial strikes.[89]

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0892679426100446 Published online by Cambridge University Press

She also identified cases that were dismissed as noncredible during the initial assessment because individual strikes had not been recorded in coalition logs or because the incorrect coordinates had been listed. In at least one case, officials dismissed a claim as noncredible because coalition records showed multiple strikes at the specified location within the specified timeframe, but the claim did not pinpoint the exact strike that inflicted the harm.[90] CIVCAS cell officials also often lacked the cultural expertise to translate information submitted in the local vernacular—such as geographical landmarks—into information that could be used to search coalition records. In one case, local witnesses reported that two civilians were killed and three civilians were wounded in an airstrike in Al-Bab Al-Gharbi, which is a historical landmark in Hit, Iraq. The CIVCAS cell dismissed the claim as noncredible because officials were "unsure where Al-Bab *and* Al-Gharbi are located"; they had assumed that the term referred to two separate neighborhoods rather than a historical landmark.[91]

However, even when individual incident reports were marked as credible, CIVCAS cell officials were often undercounting the civilians harmed in these attacks because the victims were not visible on their screens, or their bodies were miscategorized as combatants. Khan argues that confirmation bias—such as the presumption that all adult males might be insurgents—led to the coalition targeting innocent civilians and then listing the victims as combatants.[92] In one incident, the coalition struck a suspected ISIS explosives factory outside Raqqa after operators spotted white bags—thought to be ammonium nitrate—inside a walled compound. When locals reported that nine civilians were killed in the strike, the coalition reviewed the strike and determined that the building was in fact a cotton mill, the secondary explosions witnessed at the scene were reflections from other buildings, and two civilians were killed. However, the coalition maintained that the target was legitimate based on a news report that ISIS controlled cotton production in Syria.[93] Khan points to other incidents where civilian casualties were not recorded because officials could not discern them on the screen, including one case where a man was observed dragging an "unknown heavy object" from a building that was later reassessed to be "a person of smaller stature" (likely a child).[94] We also identified several cases where CIVCAS cell officials were unable to determine an exact number and so listed the casualties as a range, but then listed only the minimum number in their monthly report. For example, in one CCAR, CIVCAS cell officials concluded that "it is impossible to determine the exact number [but…] it is reasonable to assess

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0892679426100446 Published online by Cambridge University Press

that between 5 and 12 civilian casualties occurred."[95] Yet, when the case was listed in the CJTF-OIR "Monthly Civilian Casualty Report," it was reported that "five civilians were unintentionally killed"—possibly seven victims disappeared from the count.[96]

It is important that we can see the discrepancies between different counts and understand how these discrepancies might occur, but different counting methods can also erase certain civilian experiences from view. As noted above, coalition policies and procedures are concerned with civilian deaths and civilian injuries that can be attributed to specific coalition actions, but this definition obscures "the cumulative harm" that arises during a conflict, what Fionnuala Ní Aoláin defines as the composite, aggregate, collective, and layered harms that civilians might experience during a given conflict.[97] Counting dead and wounded bodies is one metric that can be used to measure the death and destruction inflicted during a conflict. Although casualty counts can detail the physical harms that are prevalent in any given operation or conflict, they say little about how families and communities *experience* these losses—simply listing wounds and causes of death provides little insight into how civilian victims must live with the long-term effects (including the chronic pain, the mental anguish, and economic deprivation). Nor does it provide information about the burden that the death or disability of a loved one places on those around them.[98] Additionally, while the CIVCAS cell counts dead bodies, it does not count damaged buildings, so the coalition database cannot tell us how coalition strikes have rendered homes uninhabitable, water supplies undrinkable, medical supplies unusable, and the coalition cannot enumerate the "aggregate impacts of protracted armed conflict on civilian populations, including individual and societal trauma, socio-economic degradation, severe and prolonged infrastructure decline, and the accumulation of civilian death across repeated attacks over time."[99]

In short, though seemingly mundane, bureaucratic procedures account for the vast discrepancies between coalition data and external counts. More than a neutral set of technical parameters, however, practices can enforce a restrictive definition of harm—one that recognizes only discrete incidents of death and injury. By tethering "valid" harm to specific airstrikes, these policies systematically ignore the indirect, reverberating, and cumulative devastation that defines the lived reality of conflict.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0892679426100446 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Numbers and Narratives

We have advanced two distinct but interrelated arguments about coalition counts. On the one hand, we have suggested that these counts were conducted in accordance with a martial logic that was more concerned with consequence management than holding the coalition more accountable for the harm caused to civilians. On the other hand, we have suggested that the policies and processes that govern these counts have worked to render certain harms more visible in debates about the conflict while obscuring those harms that do not fit within prescribed coalition categories. In this final section, we turn our attention more explicitly to the Airwars count mentioned above. As we have noted, Airwars prioritizes recognizing coalition victims rather than rationalizing coalition violence. Airwars tracks civilian harms across several conflicts in order to hold militaries accountable, ensure militaries center civilian protection measures in mission planning, and, crucially, provide civilians with the evidence needed to pursue justice for the harms that have been inflicted upon them.[100] It is important to contrast the CJTF-OIR count with the Airwars count for three reasons. First, we will outline the distinct imperatives behind these counts to draw attention to the politics involved in counting civilian casualties. Second, we will contest coalition claims that the CIVCAS cell can provide clear, objective, and impartial numerical information about the conflict, showing instead how its policies and practices can circumscribe what casualties are counted and how these casualties are categorized. Finally, we will show how organizations like Airwars seek to move beyond numerical indicators to foreground the narratives behind their numbers, showing us that numbers are necessary but insufficient.[101]

As noted above, there are sizeable discrepancies between CJTF-OIR data and Airwars figures. Airwars has tracked between 19,226 and 29,834 alleged deaths from 3,011 coalition operations in Syria and Iraq. Airwars estimates that between 8,256 and 13,352 civilian deaths can be categorized as confirmed or fair and between 2,397 and 2,821 civilian deaths can be categorized as weak. Airwars has discounted 694 to 1,077 civilian deaths and listed the remaining 7,879 to 12,584 as contested.[102] Our intention here is not to adjudicate whose data are more accurate, but to reflect on how numerical indicators circumscribe what harms are seen and how these harms are seen. As noted earlier, numerical indicators—when examined in isolation—tell us little about the civilians who were impacted in these attacks or how these civilians experienced the harms inflicted upon them. One thing that differentiates

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0892679426100446 Published online by Cambridge University Press

the Airwars count from the CJTF-OIR count is its commitment—whenever possible—to name the victims, share their images, and describe their lives with the specific intention of humanizing the dead.[103] Airwars has also collaborated with other organizations to visualize the harms inflicted during coalition attacks and to draw out some of the narratives behind their numbers.[104] One example is the interactive website that Amnesty International created using Airwars data, which visualizes the death and destruction inflicted during a four-month assault on Raqqa in 2017, focusing on the stories of individuals and families rather than abstracted numbers.[105] During this assault, Lieutenant General Stephen Townsend—who commanded CJTF-OIR at the time—insisted that the coalition applied "rigorous standards" when selecting targets and made "extraordinary efforts" to protect the civilian population, challenging humanitarian actors to "find a more precise air campaign in the history of warfare."[106]

Airwars estimates that at least 1,600 civilians were killed in coalition airstrikes during this period.[107] Using this data, Amnesty International was able to visit more than 200 strike locations, interview more than 400 witnesses, and name more than 1,000 victims.[108] Unlike the CJTF-OIR Monthly Civilian Casualty Reports, which catalogs the credible cases in a few short, formulaic, and sanitized sentences, Amnesty International's interactive website stiches together audio, images, and video to create a more immersive experience. For instance, Amnesty International uses a 360-degree panoramic image to document an attack on a five-story residential building that resulted in at least thirty-two civilian deaths, including twenty children.[109] The website enables visitors to stand amid the rubble, looking up at the exposed framework, broken concrete, and twisted steel. A video shows an interview with a man named Maher Hammada, who describes losing his wife and their two children—alongside another four relatives—in the attack.[110] There is another 360-degree panoramic image to illustrate a coalition strike on a building in Harat al-Badu, which killed Nahla Hammud and her three children.[111] A video shows a survivor walking around the rubble, describing how victims were blasted from the collapsing building. We see another survivor holding images of the deceased, who had to be buried in the garden because the fighting prevented bereaved families from transporting them to local cemeteries.[112]

These visual narratives are significant because they draw attention to the cumulative harm that eludes the categories on which the coalition relied when seeking to enumerate civilian harm. This goes beyond simply undercounting the dead and injured in an immediate sense. In his work on "slow violence," for

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0892679426100446 Published online by Cambridge University Press

example, Rob Nixon argues that we are accustomed to thinking about civilian harm in visceral terms: the mangled bodies and mutilated corpses that remain when munitions explode. While such visually arresting scenes capture the most immediate violence that is inflicted during these attacks, it obscures the violence that does not have such an immediate effect, such as the toxic remnants these munitions leave behind, which continue to deplete both people and place long after the initial detonation, and even after the conflict subsides.[113] Alongside work on the slow violence inflicted during these conflicts—and its deferred effect on the civilian population—is a growing interest in the harm that accumulates from multiple or prolonged attacks on the same location, which cannot be attributed to isolated attacks or individual events. Repeat attacks on the built environment can leave homes uninhabitable and critical infrastructure—power, sanitation, communication, healthcare, and so forth—unusable, exacerbating existing issues and causing excess deaths among civilians.[114] Yet, these cumulative and collective harms are often uncounted because these harms are not direct and cannot be ascribed to a specific incident.

The interactive visualizations that are used on the Amnesty International website draw attention to the slow and cumulative violence that is often obscured within the numerative frame. Alongside the panoramic photographs depicting the violence that coalition airstrikes have inflicted upon the urban environment are individual narratives describing how civilians experience these diverse harms. One account describes how a woman named Rasha Badran was forced to flee her home after three artillery shells slammed into the building where she lived.[115] Rasha had returned home during the conflict to care for her wounded relatives in need of medical treatment but was forced to shelter with her neighbors as her home was obliterated in the attack. After one month of the assault on Raqqa, the hospital was no longer able to treat its patients, and resource shortages meant that residents had to leave the area.[116] Once again, Rasha and her family were forced to flee, but the building where they sought shelter was also bombed, killing everyone except Rasha, her husband, and his cousin—who were both wounded in the attack. She recalls that:

> My husband was the most seriously injured—he had a head wound and blood was pouring from his ears. It was dark and we could not see anything. We called out but nobody else answered; nobody moved. It was completely silent except for the planes circling above.[117]

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0892679426100446 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Rasha managed to escape, but she lost thirty-nine relatives during this period, including her one-year-old daughter, Tulip, who they buried under a tree.[118]

Another video on the website features a man named Mohammed Aswad, who describes sheltering inside a basement during a coalition airstrike on his neighborhood, which reduced his building to rubble.[119] Mohammed could hear his nephew Mahmoud screaming outside the basement door, but he was unable to help him because his nephew was trapped under a concrete pillar. Once the bombing subsided, Mohammed was able to moisten Mahmoud's lips with water but was unable to remove the concrete that was pinning him down, so he went searching for other relatives. Mohammed discovered several dead bodies—including his brother and another nephew—but the others were not visible under the rubble.[120] These accounts are difficult to read and distressing to watch but these narratives provide an important supplement to an enumerative framework that reduces human beings to mere statistics, which conflate these singular experiences into standardized categories that can be counted, categorized, and compared. These narratives enable us to understand how civilians experience these harms: the desperation that Rasha must have experienced moving between shelters as bombs rained down from above and the anguish she must have experienced while burying her one-year-old child; the terror that Mohammed must have experienced knowing that his nephew was trapped outside during an airstrike, and the horror he must have experienced uncovering dead relatives buried amidst the rubble. These narratives are also more concerned with *who* these individuals are (singular beings, with unique and deeply traumatic stories to tell) rather than reducing them to *what* these individuals are (dead/wounded, combatant/non-combatant).[121] These narratives also enable victims of war to tell their own stories, to assert their human rights, and to insist on dignity and freedom in the face of their denial. "We are not numbers," asserts a group of youth writers from Gaza who refuse war's reductionistic frames of quantification.[122]

Conclusion

This article has examined CJTF-OIR efforts to enumerate civilian harm during Operation Inherent Resolve in order to draw attention to some underexamined martial considerations about counting civilian casualties and their ethical implications. The literature on civilian protection tends to presume that counting civilian casualties can enhance ethical deliberations because it can provide

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0892679426100446 Published online by Cambridge University Press

concrete, impartial, and unambiguous information about the harms inflicted on civilians, which can be used to assess whether militaries acted in accordance with the established moral norms and legal codes.[123] Our position is that counting civilian casualties is necessary but insufficient. Accurate numerical information is needed to capture the harms inflicted in a conflict, to ensure that victim experiences receive some recognition, and to hold militaries accountable when their actions violate the rules. Yet, this article has drawn attention to other ethico-political considerations that are often overlooked in these conversations, including the rationale behind certain counts, the interpretative work needed to conduct these counts, and how a reliance on numerical indicators can conceal certain harms. We argued, for example, that CJTF-OIR policies on recording civilian casualties were imbued with martial considerations about effective consequence management techniques, with accurate information needed so that coalition officials could contest those claims it considered to be non-credible. At the same time, we argued that the categories that the CJTF-OIR constructed in its policies and procedures—and the interpretative work that went into counting, categorizing, and collating these casualties—worked to obscure certain civilian harms. We argued that these concerns were evident in both the discrepancies between the coalition count and the Airwars count and the fact that certain harms seemed to elude enumeration, including the indirect, reverberating, and cumulative harms to civilians.

Our arguments *about* enumeration should not be seen as an argument *against* enumeration, not least because some militaries have stopped enumerating these harms. On December 21, 2023, the Pentagon issued new instructions on civilian harm mitigation and response, which seemed to formalize various measures trialed in Operation Inherent Resolve, including tracking civilian harm.[124] The instruction stated that a Civilian Harm Assessment Cell (CHAC) should be established whenever a conflict commences to collate information on civilian casualties in order to assist with consequence management, and even investigations into possible war crimes.[125] The instruction also outlined provisions for a Civilian Protection Center of Excellence inside the Pentagon, which would analyze the data flowing into CHAC spreadsheets to locate possible patterns or spot possible trends.[126] Though the instruction continued to prioritize martial considerations above humanitarian concerns—insisting that "the protection of civilians and civilian objects is fundamentally consistent with the effective, efficient and decisive use of force"—they at least bring civilian harms into the consideration of war

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0892679426100446 Published online by Cambridge University Press

operations.[127] In March 2025, however, the Pentagon announced that the Civilian Protection Center of Excellence would be terminated as the Trump administration set about removing what it viewed as administrative impediments to achieving mission success.[128] The Pentagon has not confirmed whether the entire instruction on civilian harm mitigation and response will be abandoned, but it has removed the individuals who were charged with collecting this information and, at the time of writing, it has stopped releasing data on civilian casualties.[129]

This refusal to count is concerning because it suggests that the Pentagon has little interest in civilian protection. Indeed, the current U.S. Secretary of Defense, Pete Hegseth, has expressed public distain for rules of engagement and international law, which are the cornerstones of civilian protection. He has also suggested that what he calls the "warrior ethos" has been unnecessarily constrained by military lawyers who are charged with giving legal advice on military targeting operations and crucial considerations of military necessity and proportionality.[130] In the last decade or so, the minimization of civilian casualties has become an ever more important component of war fighting, but from Israel's war in Gaza to the American and Israeli assault on Iran, it seems we may be witnessing a weakening of the norms surrounding civilian protection. Now Hegseth speaks not of minimizing civilian casualties but rather: "Maximum lethality, not tepid legality."[131] Counting civilian casualties might be insufficient, as we have argued, but it is a vitally important necessary first step, and the dismantling of the infrastructure designed to protect against and count civilian casualties is an extremely concerning development.[132] Those concerned with reducing civilian harm are now even more reliant on the data that is produced by organizations such as Airwars. These NGOs are invaluable as we seek to engage more meaningfully with the civilian populations caught up in these conflicts and to understand their embodied experiences of both the direct harm that is done to them and their communities *as well as* the indirect, cumulative, and reverberating harms to their lived environments.

Notes

[1] Diane M. Nelson, *Who Counts? The Mathematics of Death and Life after Genocide* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2015), p. 24

[2] Azmat Khan, Haley Willis, Christoph Koettl, Christiaan Triebert, and Lila Hassan, "Documents Reveal Basic Flaws in Pentagon Dismissals of Civilian Casualty Claims," *New York Times*, updated January 6, 2022, www.nytimes.com/2021/12/31/us/pentagon-airstrikes-syria-iraq.html.

[3] Department of Defense, "Combined Joint Task Force—Operation Inherent Resolve (CJTF-OIR) Policy for Reporting and Responding to Civilian Casualty Incidents" (memorandum, September 27, 2017), int.nyt.com/data/documenttools/cjtf-oir-policy-civilian-casualty-incidents-2017/4a3542525b1051c6/full.pdf; Department of Defense, "Combined Joint Task Force—Operation Inherent Resolve (CJTF-OIR) Policy for Reporting and Responding to Civilian Casualty Incidents" (memorandum, May 9, 2018), int.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0892679426100446 Published online by Cambridge University Press

nyt.com/data/documenttools/cjtf-oir-policy-civilian-casualty-incidents-2018/acd1dd219d5ba55b/full.pdf; and Under Secretary of Defense, Department of Defense, "Interim Regulations for Condolence or Sympathy Payments to Friendly Civilians for Injury or Loss That Is Incident to Military Operations" (memorandum, June 22, 2020), int.nyt.com/data/documenttools/interim-regulations-condolence-payments/73d94113139dc2f0/full.pdf.

[4] Michael Levenson, "What to Know about the Civilian Casualty Files," *New York Times*, updated December 20, 2021, www.nytimes.com/2021/12/18/us/airstrikes-civilian-casualty-files-pentagon.html.

[5] Peter Andreas and Kelly M. Greenhill, eds., *Sex, Drugs, and Body Counts: The Politics of Numbers in Global Crime and Conflict* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2010); Joel Best, *Damned Lies and Statistics: Untangling Numbers from the Media, Politicians, and Activists* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001); and Sally Engle Merry, *The Seductions of Quantification: Measuring Human Rights, Gender Violence, and Sex Trafficking* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016).

[6] Azmat Khan, "Hidden Pentagon Records Reveal Patterns of Failure in Deadly Airstrikes," *New York Times*, December 18, 2021, www.nytimes.com/interactive/2021/12/18/us/airstrikes-pentagon-records-civilian-deaths.html. See also Oona A. Hathaway and Azmat Khan, "'Mistakes' in War," *University of Pennsylvania Law Review* 173, no. 1 (2024), pp. 1–88.

[7] Khan, "Hidden Pentagon Records Reveal Patterns of Failure in Deadly Airstrikes."

[8] Ibid.

[9] Andreas and Greenhill, *Sex, Drugs, and Body Counts*; Best, *Damned Lies and Statistics*; and Merry, *Seductions of Quantification.*

[10] Taylor B. Seybolt, Jay D. Aronson, and Baruch Fischhoff, eds., *Counting Civilian Casualties: An Introduction to Recording and Estimating Nonmilitary Deaths in Conflict* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

[11] Frederik Rosén, *Collateral Damage: A Candid History of a Peculiar Form of Death* (Oxford: Hurst, 2016); Bruce Cronin, *Bugsplat: The Politics of Collateral Damage in Western Armed Conflicts* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018); and Hugo Slim, *Killing Civilians: Method, Madness, and Morality in War* (Oxford: Hurst, 2007).

[12] "Protection of the Civilian Population," Art. 51 in "Protocol Additional to the Geneva Conventions of 12 August 1949, and Relating to the Protection of Victims of International Armed Conflicts (Protocol I)," June 8, 1977, sec. 2, ihl-databases.icrc.org/en/ihl-treaties/api-1977/article-51.

[13] Ibid., sec. 5(a). See also Judith Gardam, *Necessity, Proportionality and the Use of Force by States* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 2004); Helen M. Kinsella, *The Image before the Weapon: A Critical History of the Distinction between Combatant and Civilian* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2011); Michael Newton and Larry May, *Proportionality in International Law* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014); and Rebecca Sutton, *The Humanitarian Civilian: How the Idea of Distinction Circulates within and beyond International Humanitarian Law* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021).

[14] "Precautions in Attack," Art. 57 in "Protocol Additional to the Geneva Conventions of 12 August 1949," sec. 2(a)(ii), ihl-databases.icrc.org/en/ihl-treaties/api-1977/article-57. See also Adil Ahmad Haque, *Law and Morality at War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017); Eric Talbot Jensen, "Precautions against the Effects of Attacks in Urban Areas," *International Review of the Red Cross* no. 901 (April 2016), pp. 147–75; Sebastian Kaempf, *Saving Soldiers or Civilians? Casualty-Aversion versus Civilian Protection in Asymmetric Conflicts* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 2018); Sahr Muhammedally, "Minimizing Civilian Harm in Populated Areas: Lessons from Examining ISAF and AMISOM Policies," *International Review of the Red Cross*, pp. 225–48; Neil C. Renic, *Asymmetric Killing: Risk Avoidance, Just War, and the Warrior Ethos* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020); and Isabel Robinson and Ellen Nohle, "Proportionality and Precautions in Attack: The Reverberating Effects of Using Explosive Weapons in Populated Areas," *International Review of the Red Cross*, pp. 107–45.

[15] John Tirman, *The Deaths of Others: The Fate of Civilians in America's Wars* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

[16] Daniel R. Mahanty and Alex Moorehead, "Costs of War Can't Be Assessed without Official Civilian Casualty Estimates," Just Security, April 3, 2019, www.justsecurity.org/63488/costs-of-war-cant-be-assessed-without-official-civilian-casualty-estimates/. See also Matthew Coen Leep, "(Ac)Counting (for) their Dead: Responsiveness to Iraqi Civilian Casualties in the US House of Representatives," *International Politics* 52, no 1 (January 2015), pp. 45–65; Catherine Lutz, "Bureaucratic Weaponry and the Production of Ignorance in Military Operations on Guam," *Current Anthropology* 60, no. S19 (February 2019), pp. S108–21; Margot Norris, "Military Censorship and the Body Count in the Persian Gulf War," *Cultural Critique* 19 (Autumn 1991), pp. 223–45; Amy Ross, "The Body Counts: Civilian Casualties and the Crisis of Human Rights," in Alice Bullard, ed., *Human Rights in Crisis* (London: Routledge, 2017), pp. 35–47; Nicholas J. Wheeler, "Dying for 'Enduring Freedom': Accepting Responsibility for Civilian Casualties in the War against Terrorism," *International Relations* 16, no. 2 (August 2002), pp. 205–25;

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0892679426100446 Published online by Cambridge University Press

and Lauren B. Wilcox, *Bodies of Violence: Theorizing Embodied Subjects in International Relations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).

[17] Jennifer Hyndman, "Whose Bodies Count? Feminist Geopolitics and Lessons from Iraq," in Robin L. Riley, Chandra Talpade Mohanty and Minnie Bruce Pratt, eds., *Feminism and War: Confronting US Imperialism* (London: Zed Books, 2009), pp. 194–206; Keith Krause, "Bodies Count: The Politics and Practices of War and Violent Death Data," *Human Remains and Violence* 3, no. 1 (2017), pp. 90–115; Moya Lloyd, "The Onto-Politics of Body Counts," *Political Studies* (OnlineFirst, 2025); Cristina Masters, "Body Counts: The Biopolitics of Death," in Elizabeth Dauphinee and Cristina Masters, eds., *The Logics of Biopower and the War on Terror* (Basingstoke, U.K.: Palgrave, 2007), pp. 43–60; and Johanna Rodehau-Noack, "Counting Bodies, Preventing War: Future Conflict and the Ethics of Fatality Numbers," *British Journal of Politics and International Relations* 26, no. 3 (August 2024), pp. 622–42.

[18] Every Casualty, *Standards for Casualty Recording* (London: Every Casualty Worldwide, 2020, p. vii everycasualty.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/StandardsforCasualtyRecording-Version1.0.12020-en.pdf.

[19] Thomas Gregory, "Calibrating Violence: Body Counts as a Weapon of War," *European Journal of International Security* 7, no. 4 (November 2022), pp. 479–507.

[20] Ibid. See also John Bohannon, "Counting the Dead: Afghanistan," *Science* 331, no. 6022 (March 2011), pp. 1256–60.

[21] Thomas Gregory, *Weaponizing Civilian Protection: Counterinsurgency and Collateral Damage in Afghanistan* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2025).

[22] Emily Gilbert, "The Gift of War: Cash, Counterinsurgency, and 'Collateral Damage'," *Security Dialogue* 46, no. 5 (October 2015), pp. 403–21.

[23] Gregory, "Calibrating Violence."

[24] Center for Army Lessons Learned, *Afghanistan Civilian Casualty Prevention: Observations, Insights, and Lessons*, No. 12–16 (Fort Leavenworth, Kans.: Center for Army Lessons Learned, June 2012), pp. 35–48, info.publicintelligence.net/CALL-AfghanCIVCAS.pdf.

[25] David Petraeus, quoted in "Gen. Petraeus Issues Updated Tactical Directive, Emphasizes 'Disciplined Use of Force'," Defense Visual Information Distribution Service, August 4, 2010, www.dvidshub.net/news/53931/gen-petraeus-issues-updated-tactical-directive-emphasizes-disciplined-use-force.

[26] Department of Defense, "Combined Joint Task Force," September 27, 2017, p. 1. See also Department of Defense, "Combined Joint Task Force," May 9, 2018.

[27] Department of Defense, "Combined Joint Task Force," September 27, 2017, p. 5.

[28] Ibid., pp. 2–4. These documents do not provide specific details about the size and composition of the CIVCAS cell, except for saying that it is the CJTF-OIR chief of staff who is responsible for selecting one. On December 21, 2023, the Pentagon issued DoD Instruction 3000.17, "Civilian Harm Mitigation and Response," which includes a dedicated section on civilian harm assessment cells (CHACs). It states that combatant commanders should establish a CHAC in preparation for a conflict, but notes that "the size, structure, and specific responsibilities of CHACs . . . may differ depending upon the nature of the command and the types of military operations in which it engages." It states that CHAC staff should include personnel with expertise in intelligence, joint fires, civilian-military relations, and poststrike assessment and analysis, as well as personnel with an understanding of the region, language, and culture. It also states that CHAC staff will have access to legal advice from command counsel. See Department of Defense, "DoD Instruction 3000.17: Civilian Harm Mitigation and Response," December 21, 2023, pp. 39–40, www.esd.whs.mil/Portals/54/Documents/DD/issuances/dodi/300017p.pdf.

[29] Department of Defense, "Combined Joint Task Force," September 27, 2017, p. 2.

[30] Ibid., p. 3.

[31] Ibid., p. 3.

[32] Ibid., p. 3.

[33] Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, "No-Strike and the Collateral Damage Estimation Methodology," CJCSI 3160.01A, October 12, 2012, p. 117 (emphasis added), int.nyt.com/data/documenttools/no-strike-collateral-damage-estimation/6632f2785aff5bba/full.pdf. Note that other troop-contributing countries might have their own definitions.

[34] Kinsella, *Image before the Weapon*. See also Neve Gordon and Nicola Perugini, "The Politics of Human Shielding: On the Resignification of Space and the Constitution of Civilians as Shields in Liberal Wars," in "The Politics of the List: Law, Security, Technology," theme issue, *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 34, no. 1 (February 2016), pp. 168–87; Derek Gregory, "The Death of the Civilian?," *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 24, no. 5 (October 2006), pp. 633–38; and Lauren Wilcox, "Embodying Algorithmic War: Gender, Race, and the Posthuman in Drone Warfare," in special issue on securing with algorithms, *Security Dialogue* 48, no. 1 (February 2017), pp. 11–28.

[35] Department of Defense, "Combined Joint Task Force," September 27, 2017, pp. 5–6.

[36] Hathaway and Khan, "'Mistakes' in War," p. 54.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0892679426100446 Published online by Cambridge University Press

[37] Department of Defense, "Combined Joint Task Force," September 27, 2017, p. 4. See also Benjamin C. Krick, Jonathan B. Petkun, and Mara R. Revkin, "Civilian Harm and Military Legitimacy: Evidence from the Battle of Mosul," *International Organization* 79, no. 2 (Spring 2025), pp. 332–57.
[38] Gregory, "Calibrating Violence."
[39] Khan, "Hidden Pentagon Records Reveal Patterns of Failure in Deadly Airstrikes." See, for example, Combined Joint Task Force, Operation Inherent Resolve, "Monthly Civilian Casualty Report," June 27, 2019, int.nyt.com/data/documenttools/press-release-6-28-2019/a1735cff295ea1cf/full.pdf.
[40] Ibid.
[41] Combined Joint Task Force, "CIVCAS Credibility Assessment Report (CCAR) for [redacted]," CJFLCC-OIR CCAR 003/17, January 17, 2017, p. 4, int.nyt.com/data/documenttools/c-1-13-17-iraq/21567223601ef02c/full.pdf.
[42] Ibid., pp. 7–19.
[43] Combined Joint Task Force, Operation Inherent Resolve, "Monthly Civilian Casualty Report," March 4, 2017, p. 4, int.nyt.com/data/documenttools/press-release-3-4-2017/f67f8c5205c86f0a/full.pdf.
[44] Department of Defense, "Memorandum for CIVCAS Team: CIVCAS Credibility Assessment Report (CCAR)—Strike [Redacted] Strike—Civilian Request for Rescue," CJFLCC-OIR 78/17, May 25, 2017, int.nyt.com/data/documenttools/c-5-15-17-iraq/886942e6cb89a8a6/full.pdf.
[45] Ibid., p. 2.
[46] Ibid., pp. 2–3.
[47] Combined Joint Task Force, Operation Inherent Resolve, "Monthly Civilian Casualty Report," July 7, 2017, p. 15, int.nyt.com/data/documenttools/press-release-7-7-2017/e4cb887cba356400/full.pdf.
[48] Ibid.
[49] See, for example, Combined Joint Task Force, "Monthly Civilian Casualty Report," June 27, 2019, p. 1.
[50] Ibid. See Richard Halpern, "Collateral Damage and the Tragic Form," *Critical Inquiry* 45, no. 1 (Autumn 2018), pp. 47–75; Patricia Owens, "Accidents Don't Just Happen: The Liberal Politics of High-Technology 'Humanitarian' War," *Millennium* 32 no. 3 (December 2003), pp. 595–616; and Maja Zehfuss, "Killing Civilians: Thinking the Practice of War," *British Journal of Politics and International Relations* 14, no. 3 (August 2012), pp. 423–40.
[51] Craig Jones, *The War Lawyers: The United States, Israel, and Juridical Warfare* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021); Eyal Weizman, "Legislative Attack," *Theory, Culture & Society* 27, no. 6 (November 2010), pp. 11–32; and Maja Zehfuss, *War and the Politics of Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018).
[52] Christiane Wilke, Helyeh Doutaghi, and Hijaab Yahya, "Imperial Ignorance and Beyond: Mapping the Production and Practices of Organized Ignorance," in Shireen Hassim and Anna C. Korteweg, eds., *Handbook on Politics and Society* (Cheltenham, U.K.: Edward Elgar, 2025), pp. 310–26. See also James C. Scott, *Seeing like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1998); and Arjun Appadurai, "Number in the Colonial Imagination," in Carol A. Breckenridge and Peter van der Veer, eds., *Orientalism and the Postcolonial Predicament: Perspectives on South Asia* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1993), pp. 314–40.
[53] See "U.S.-Led Coalition in Iraq & Syria," Airwars, accessed February 17, 2026, airwars.org/conflict/coalition-in-iraq-and-syria.
[54] Ibid.
[55] "Methodology," Airwars, airwars.org/about/methodology/.
[56] Ibid.
[57] Email correspondence with Emily Tripp, executive director of Airwars, April 10, 2026; on file with the authors.
[58] Krause, "Bodies Count."
[59] "About Airwars," Airwars, accessed February 17, 2026, airwars.org/about/.
[60] Every Casualty, *Standards for Casualty Recording*.
[61] Ibid.
[62] Khan et al., "Documents Reveal Basic Flaws in Pentagon Dismissals of Civilian Casualty Claims."
[63] Ibid. See also Department of Defense, "CIVCAS Allegation Closure Report Allegation No. 422," April 23, 2017, int.nyt.com/data/documenttools/allegation422/cb9ef2244ec1147d/full.pdf.
[64] Department of Defense, "CIVCAS Allegation Closure Report Allegation No. 422."
[65] Ibid.
[66] Ibid. See also Christiane Wilke, "Seeing and Unmaking Civilians in Afghanistan: Visual Technologies and Contested Professional Visions," *Science, Technology, & Human Values* 42, no. 6 (November 2017), pp. 1031–60.
[67] Ryan Goodman, "The Pentagon Needs a Better Way to Count Civilian Casualties," Opinion, *New York Times*, April 26, 2018, www.nytimes.com/2018/04/26/opinion/civilian-casualties-pentagon-military.html.
[68] Ibid.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0892679426100446 Published online by Cambridge University Press

[69] "New Documents Reveal Fresh Concerns about the Coalition's System for Investigating Civilian Harm," Airwars in partnership with Responsible Statecraft, February 21, 2022, airwars.org/airwars-us-coalition-investigate-civilian-harm-rfis-isis-nyt-declassified-documents/.
[70] Merry, *Seductions of Quantification*, pp. 3–4.
[71] Ibid., p. 1.
[72] Ibid., pp. 19–20.
[73] Ibid., p. 5.
[74] Ibid., pp. 19–20.
[75] Scott, *Seeing like a State*, pp. 80–82.
[76] Department of Defense, "Combined Joint Task Force—Operation Inherent Resolve (CJTF-OIR) Policy for Reporting and Responding to Civilian Casualty Incidents," September 27, 2017, p. 13.
[77] Ibid. (emphasis added).
[78] Fionnuala Ní Aoláin, "Cumulative Civilian Harm in Gaza: A Gendered View," Just Security, June 25, 2025, www.justsecurity.org/115407/cumulative-civilian-harm-gaza-gendered-view/.
[79] Derek Gregory, "'The Rush to the Intimate': Counterinsurgency and the Cultural Turn," *Radical Philosophy*, 150 (July/August 2008), pp. 8–23, at p. 19.
[80] Kinsella, *Image before the Weapon*.
[81] Department of Defense, "Combined Joint Task Force—Operation Inherent Resolve (CJTF-OIR) Policy for Reporting and Responding to Civilian Casualty Incidents," September 27, 2017, p. 13.
[82] Ibid., pp. 20–21. See also Department of Defense, "Memorandum for CIVCAS Team: CIVCAS Credibility Assessment Report (CCAR) for Allegation 1260, Al Qaim, IZ, 05 OCT 17," October 13, 2017, pp. 2–3, int.nyt.com/data/documenttools/c-10-5-17-iraq/ab5fc02b5a29f9b2/full.pdf. For example, a slant written as "8/6/3" indicates eight adult males, six adult females, and three children.
[83] Kinsella, *Image before the Weapon*, pp. 4–5. See also Wilcox, "Embodying Algorithmic War."
[84] Hugh Gusterson, *Drone: Remote Control Warfare* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2017).
[85] See, for example, Department of Defense, "Memorandum for Commander, Combined Joint Forces Land Component Command-Operation Inherent Resolve: Legal Review of CIVCAS Credibility Assessment Report (6 November 2016), Shahid-Yuni As Sab, Iraq," November 16, 2016, p. 6, int.nyt.com/data/documenttools/c-11-6-16-iraq/c215e99f24013fa9/full.pdf; CIDNE, "CIVCAS Tracker: Allegation Number 107," November 20, 2015, p. 3, int.nyt.com/data/documenttools/c-11-20-15-syria/6a9a60a3cd660421/full.pdf; and Department of Defense, "Endorsement of Army Regulation 15-6 Investigation into Civilian Casualties Associated with Kinetic Strike in Kawurilli, SY on 28 July 2016," October 4, 2016, p. 5, int.nyt.com/data/documenttools/c-7-28-16-syria/1fa87b4fd0985893/full.pdf.
[86] See, for example, Department of Defense, "Memorandum for CIVCAS Team: CIVCAS Credibility Assessment Report (CCAR) for 953, Al Taqbah Raqqah, Syria 01 March 2017," October 19, 2017, p. 3, int.nyt.com/data/documenttools/c-3-3-17-syria/b16347572a300f27/full.pdf; Combined Joint Task Force, Operation Inherent Resolve, "Monthly Civilian Casualty Report," November 30, 2017, p. 7, int.nyt.com/data/documenttools/press-release-11-30-2017/1c5ac8e2d17e7032/full.pdf; Department of Defense, "Memorandum for Record: CIVCAS Allegation Closure Report, Allegation No. 368," March 29, 2017, int.nyt.com/data/documenttools/c-2-27-17-iraq/7162e7857e24a8ce/full.pdf; Department of Defense, "Memorandum for CIVCAS Team: CIVCAS Credibility Assessment Report (CCAR) . . . (ISIS Staging Area and Weapons Cache, Mosul Train Station) (CJFLCC-OIR 28/17), March 18, 2017, p. 4, int.nyt.com/data/documenttools/c-3-3-17-iraq/d111e8ba983dafc2/full.pdf; and Combined Joint Task Force, Operation Inherent Resolve, "Monthly Civilian Casualty Report," April 30, 2017, int.nyt.com/data/documenttools/press-release-4-30-2017/ccdbcdad55896ea8/full.pdf.
[87] Michael J. McNerney, Gabrielle Tarini, Karen M. Sudkamp, Larry Lewis, Michelle Grisé, and Pauline Moore, *U.S. Department of Defense Civilian Casualty Policies and Procedures: An Independent Assessment* (Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND, 2022), www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/research_reports/RRA400/RRA418-1/RAND_RRA418-1.pdf.
[88] Hathaway and Khan, "'Mistakes' in War," pp. 54–69.
[89] Khan, "Hidden Pentagon Records Reveal Patterns of Failure in Deadly Airstrikes."
[90] Department of Defense, "CIVCAS Cell Initial Assessment," March 17, 2017 (incident date), September 23, 2017 (opened date), p. 4, int.nyt.com/data/documenttools/nc-3-17-17-iraq/25e5b94a569947e8/full.pdf.
[91] Quoted in Azmat Khan et al., "Documents Reveal Basic Flaws in Pentagon Dismissals of Civilian Casualty Claims."
[92] Khan, "Hidden Pentagon Records Reveal Patterns of Failure in Deadly Airstrikes."
[93] Ibid.
[94] Hathaway and Khan, "'Mistakes' in War," p. 41.
[95] Department of Defense, "Memorandum for CIVCAS Team: CIVCAS Credibility Assessment Report (CCAR)," October 19, 2017, p. 3, int.nyt.com/data/documenttools/c-3-3-17-syria/b16347572a300f27/full.pdf.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0892679426100446 Published online by Cambridge University Press

[96] Combined Joint Task Force, "Monthly Civilian Casualty Report," November 30, 2017, p. 7. See also Department of Defense, "Memorandum for CIVCAS Team," March 18, 2017, p. 4; and Combined Joint Task Force, "Monthly Civilian Casualty Report," April 30, 2017.
[97] Aoláin, "Cumulative Civilian Harm in Gaza."
[98] Craig Jones, "Gaza and the Great March of Return: Enduring Violence and Spaces of Wounding," *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 48, no. 2 (June 2023), pp. 249–62.
[99] Aoláin, "Cumulative Civilian Harm in Gaza."
[100] "About Airwars," Airwars.
[101] Naeem Inayatullah and Elizabeth Dauphinee, eds., *Narrative Global Politics: Theory, History and the Personal in International Relations* (London: Routledge, 2016).
[102] "U.S.-Led Coalition in Iraq & Syria," Airwars.
[103] Lloyd, "Onto-Politics of Body Counts."
[104] Elizabeth Dauphinée, *The Ethics of Researching War: Looking for Bosnia* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007).
[105] "Unprecedented Investigation Reveals US-Led Coalition Killed More than 1,600 Civilians in Raqqa 'Death Trap'," Amnesty International, April 25, 2019, www.amnestyusa.org/press-releases/unprecedented-investigation-reveals-us-led-coalition-killed-more-than-1600-civilians-in-raqqa-death-trap/.
[106] "Former Coalition Commander Lt Gen Townsend Responds to Airwars Article on Raqqa," Airwars, September 15, 2017, airwars.org/former-coalition-commander-lt-gen-townsend-responds-to-airwars-article-on-raqqa-2/.
[107] "Unprecedented Investigation Reveals US-Led Coalition Killed More than 1,600 Civilians in Raqqa 'Death Trap'," Amnesty International.
[108] Ibid.
[109] "Stories of Civilians under Fire in Raqqa's War," Amnesty International, accessed February 17, 2026, raqqa.amnesty.org/story.html.
[110] Ibid.
[111] Ibid.
[112] Ibid.
[113] Rob Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2011), pp. 199–232.
[114] Ammar Azzouz, *Domicide: Architecture, War and the Destruction of Home in Syria* (London: Bloomsbury, 2023); Jeannie L. Sowers, Erika Weinthal and Neda Zawahri, "Targeting Environmental Infrastructures, International Law, and Civilians in the New Middle Eastern Wars," *Security Dialogue* 48, no. 5 (October 2017), pp. 410–430.
[115] "Stories of Civilians under Fire in Raqqa's War," Amnesty International.
[116] Ibid.
[117] Ibid.
[118] Ibid.
[119] Ibid.
[120] Ibid.
[121] Adriana Cavarero, *Relating Narratives: Storytelling and Selfhood*, trans. Paul A. Kottman (London: Routledge, 2000). See also Adriana Cavarero with Judith Butler and Bonnie Honig, *Toward a Feminist Ethics of Nonviolence*, ed. Timothy Huzar and Clare Woodford (New York: Fordham University Press, 2021).
[122] Ahmed Alnaouq and Pam Bailey, *We Are Not Numbers: The Voices of Gaza's Youth* (London: Penguin, 2026).
[123] Seybolt et al., *Counting Civilian Casualties.*
[124] Department of Defense, "DoD Instruction 3000.17."
[125] Ibid., pp. 39–40.
[126] Ibid., pp. 46–47.
[127] Ibid., p. 4.
[128] Alex Horton, Meg Kelly, and Dan Lamothe, "Pentagon Moves to Gut Operations Focused on Reducing Civilian Harm," *Washington Post*, updated March 4, 2025, www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/2025/03/04/trump-hegseth-pentagon-firings-civilian-harm/.
[129] Nick Turse, "Pete Hegseth Is Gutting Pentagon Programs That Reduce Civilian Casualties," *Intercept*, April 15, 2025, theintercept.com/2025/04/15/pete-hegseth-pentagon-civilian-casualties-harm/. See also Madison Hunke, "US Military Voices Speak Out in Support of Civilian Protection," Center for Civilians in Conflict, July 1, 2025, civiliansinconflict.org/blog/us-military-voices-speak-out-in-support-of-civilian-protection/.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0892679426100446 Published online by Cambridge University Press

[130] Hannah Allam, "The U.S. Built a Blueprint to Avoid Civilian War Casualties. Trump Officials Scrapped It," ProPublica, March 10, 2026, www.propublica.org/article/trump-defense-department-iran-hegseth-civilian-casualties.

[131] Quoted in Nitsuh Abebe, "Every Pentagon Has Its Buzzword. For Hegseth's, It's 'Lethality,'" *New York Times*, March 26, 2026, www.nytimes.com/2026/03/26/magazine/lethality-us-military-pete-hegseth.html.

[132] Hyndman, "Whose Bodies Count?"; Krause, "Bodies Count"; and Masters, "Body Counts."

Abstract: The article examines efforts by the Combined Joint Task Force—Operation Inherent Resolve (CJTF-OIR) to enumerate the harm its forces inflicted on Syrian and Iraqi civilians between 2014 and 2018. Drawing on more than 1,300 declassified civilian harm assessments, this article examines the rationale behind the decision to count civilian casualties, the policies that governed how civilian casualties were counted, and what CJTF-OIR officials did with the data collected. Although accurate counts are critical to ethical debates, we show that, on their own, these counts are insufficient when it comes to recognizing the harm inflicted upon civilians and holding militaries accountable. We trace coalition metrics back to concerns about consequence management, showing how martial considerations about optimizing violence—rather than moral concerns about constraining violence—governed the enumerative enterprise. We argue that the way the coalition previously counted civilian casualties erased certain harms from view, including the indirect, cumulative, and reverberating violence that civilians suffered during this conflict. Furthermore, we contend that these numerical indicators tell us little about how civilians experience these harms, a lack of which can become an impediment to ethical consideration. Finally, we contrast the coalition count with Airwars figures to reveal both the numerical discrepancies between the different counts and differences in how these figures have been used. We contend that counting casualties is critical, but also complicated, contestable, and—at times—too constrictive.

Keywords: body counts, civilian casualties, experience, enumeration, narration, Operation Inherent Resolve, Iraq, Syria

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0892679426100446 Published online by Cambridge University Press