



## Civilian Casualties

### Making sense of the numbers

International forces in Afghanistan aim for zero civilian casualties, applying that standard to all stages of operations. One civilian death is one too many, and General John Nicholson, Commander of Resolute Support, and United States Forces-Afghanistan, has said “We go to extraordinary lengths to avoid civilian casualties, and we wave off strikes if we identify civilians.”

Since 2009 the United Nations mission in Afghanistan, UNAMA, has investigated reports of civilian casualties in Afghanistan. Their work to highlight war’s effect on normal life, and in particular to improve protection for women and children, is tireless and rightly highly regarded. The downward trend recorded in their annual figures for 2017 – the first move down since 2012 – is welcome, especially amid a campaign when insurgents have specifically targeted civilians on a scale never before seen in Afghanistan.

Investigating every civilian death is no less thorough inside the Resolute Support Mission. Using a different methodology than UNAMA, the trend of casualties recorded by the RS Civilian Casualty Mitigation Team (CCMT) is in the opposite direction to that found by UNAMA. While UNAMA found that civilian casualties caused by the conflict fell 9 percent to 10,428 in 2017, RS recorded a rise to 8,319, perhaps explained by more accurate reporting by Afghan forces who, with better training, have become more aware of the effect of the war on the civilian population.

In assessing what accounts for the difference in these figures, there is no doubt who causes most civilian casualties in Afghanistan – insurgents whose hypocrisy was laid bare as they turned to Afghan civilians as their prime target in 2017 after they failed to gain ground against superior Afghan forces. RS investigators calculate that 88 percent of Afghan civilians killed and injured in 2017 were victims of the Taliban, IS-K and other insurgent groups. UNAMA assessed the proportion at 65 percent.

In other areas there were even bigger differences in assessing those killed and injured. In 2017, RS recorded no civilian casualties from international forces on the ground, and 51 from the air – 19 killed and 32 injured. RS assessed another 69 casualties (33 dead and 36 injured) were caused by the Afghan Air Force. UNAMA attributed 246 casualties to international military air strikes (154 deaths and 92 injured), and 309 casualties to the Afghan Air Force, with a further 76 casualties from air strikes attributed to unknown pro-government forces.

## Understanding the discrepancies

So how can these discrepancies be explained?

Both UNAMA and RS have experienced teams who examine every allegation. One explanation lies in different sources that are available to either UNAMA or RS. In the case of ground attacks, the RS team collect and assess operational planning data, and upon completion of operations potential civilian casualties are assessed, with some reported immediately by units involved. For air strikes, RS know whether a plane or unmanned aerial vehicle was involved. Everything is recorded and stored, including gun-tapes from Afghan planes and helicopters, which now carry out most air strikes.

The RS investigation team assess that in several of the cases where casualties were alleged to be from air strikes, no aerial platforms were nearby at the time, and reported explosions may have resulted from concealed IEDs or insurgents firing rockets and mortars. In other cases, RS investigators have access to surveillance information that gives them confidence that civilians were not present at the scene of a strike.

For example, on November 19 2017, in the air campaign under new US authorities striking Taliban revenue streams, a suspected drug lab was struck in northern Helmand. UNAMA relayed information to RS alleging that nine civilians from the same family were killed in the strike. They shared detailed information about three women, two boys and four girls – including a one-year-old. This claim of nine dead was included in the UNAMA report, but not counted by RS. RS investigations disproved the allegation as surveillance of the house over a significant period of time showed no sign of the presence of a family. Local government officials said that no civilians were killed.

While RS shares evidence with UNAMA to enhance understanding, UNAMA investigations rely primarily instead on eyewitness accounts, requiring at least three independent sources per incident. UNAMA proactively search for sources of different genders and from different ethnic groups, evaluating them for credibility. But at times are unable to conduct onsite investigations owing to security constraints, and in order to protect privacy will not share eyewitness identity, which means their accounts are difficult to corroborate.

This difference in methodology is only one explanation for disparate findings. Of the 99 separate allegations of civilian casualties by international military forces passed to RS by UNAMA, only three air strikes were proved to be confirmed civilian casualty cases to the satisfaction of the RS investigation board.

Another discrepancy results from different definitions for ‘civilian’ and for ‘casualty’. Legal advisers on both sides assess civilians differently. For UNAMA the definition is wide, giving legal protection to people who might be considered combatants under other interpretations of international humanitarian law. And in defining ‘casualties’, UNAMA includes those treated at the scene who return home, while a casualty to RS is someone whose injuries involved treatment at a medical facility.

## **Improved protection for civilians in Afghan military operations**

Increasingly Afghan forces, in the air and on the ground, are conducting the campaign without international support. They now have their own forward ground controllers to identify targets, and Intelligence, Surveillance and Reconnaissance (ISR) platforms to send accurate information to attack planes. On many occasions Afghan planes return to base without releasing their weapons rather than risking civilian lives (as indeed do the air platforms of international military forces).

UNAMA “acknowledged the significant measures undertaken by the Afghan national security forces to improve the protection of civilians in 2017, especially during ground fighting and related operations.” As well as new policies, UNAMA noted “the adoption of practical measures on the battlefield, including relocation of security bases from civilian areas, and increased constraints on the use of mortars and other indirect fire weapons during ground fighting in civilian-populated areas.”

There were also indications that the “overall increase in air operations may have played a role in constraining and/or deterring large scale attacks against cities by anti-government elements.” And this is in stark contrast to the way the enemy is increasingly prosecuting its campaign. Afghanistan’s prime security concern is large-scale attacks by insurgents who indiscriminately pursue civilians in their homes, schools, hospitals, markets and places of worship, rather than carrying out their fight on the battlefield. Instead of seeking military targets, insurgents led a massacre of 150 civilians, with another 600 injured, while destroying the German Embassy in May 2017.

And already in 2018, the Taliban have stormed the Intercontinental Hotel in Kabul with AK-47 assault rifles, killing 22 civilians. IS-K attacked Save the Children in Jalalabad, killing four people and wounding 22 at an organization whose primary aim is to help Afghan children have a better life and future. And in a commandeered ambulance, the Taliban again unleashed their fury upon innocent civilians on the streets of Kabul, killing 103 and injuring 235 more.

There was no dispute over who was responsible for these casualties.