

The Human Toll of America's Air Wars

Airstrikes allowed America to wage war with minimal risk to its troops.

But for civilians on the ground, they brought terror and tragedy.

By Azmat Khan **Photographs by Ivor Prickett** Published Dec. 19, 2021





1. "No civilian presence"

For Ali Fathi Zeidan and his extended family, West Mosul was in 2016 still the best of many bad options. Their longtime home in a nearby village, Wana, had been taken by ISIS, then retaken by Kurdish pesh merga forces, and — as if that were not enough — it stood just seven miles below the crumbling Mosul Dam, which engineers had long warned might soon collapse, creating a deluge that would kill everyone in its path. The family had avoided the camps for internally displaced people, where they would have faced a constant risk of separation, and found their way instead to the city, to a grimy industrial neighborhood called Yabisat. They moved into a storage facility, divided it up into separate rooms, brought in a water tank, built a kitchen and a bathroom. Though ISIS had taken Mosul, parts of the city were still relatively safe. Now it was home.

Family was everywhere. Zeidan's daughter Ghazala was married to a man named Muhammad Ahmed Araj, who grew up in the neighborhood. Araj's brother, Abdul Aziz Ahmed Araj, lived nearby in a small, crowded apartment. Zeidan's other daughter moved into an apartment on the other side of Mosul with her husband and their six children, but one of them, 11-year-old Sawsan, preferred to spend her time across town in Yabisat: She was attached to her grandparents and loved playing with her cousins.

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Sawsan had been staying with her grandparents for a week when the whole family sat down to dinner on March 5, 2016. All told, there were 21 people around the table. None of them knew that their Iraqi neighborhood was at that moment in the cross hairs of the American military.

Weeks before, Delta Force commandos had captured a high-ranking operative in ISIS' burgeoning chemical-weapons program, and the information he provided interrogators led military officials to a chemical-weapons production plant in Yabisat; observers had been studying the site for weeks, by way of surveillance flights.

On March 2, military officials presented their findings for validation, as part of the Pentagon's "deliberate targeting" process, which — as opposed to the rapid process of targeting in the heat of battle — required vetting at multiple levels and stages across the U.S.-led coalition. It had all the makings of a good strike. Unlike with so many other targets, military officials had human intelligence directly from the enemy and video surveillance that showed clear target sites.

They had also concluded that there was no civilian presence within the target compound. Though the surveillance video had captured 10 children playing near the target structure, the military officials who reviewed this footage determined the children would not be harmed by a nighttime strike because they did not live there: They were classified as "transient," merely passing through during daylight hours.

But as investigators later documented, during the target-validation process one U.S. official disputed this conclusion: A "representative" with the United

States Agency for International Development said that the children and their families most likely lived at or around the target compound. In the current environment, she argued, parents would be unlikely to let their children stray far from home. In her view, the determination that there was “no civilian presence” at the target was wrong, and authorizing the strike could lead to the deaths of these children and their parents and families. Military officials dismissed her concerns and authorized the strike.

The site of a strike in Yabisat, West Mosul.Ivor Prickett for The New York Times

Three days later, on the evening of March 5, Abdul Aziz heard the explosions, maybe a dozen in all. They came from the direction of his brother’s house. He wanted to see what happened, but because bombings were often accompanied by a second round of missiles, he waited. Later, when he approached the block, he saw the flames and fire consuming what was once his brother’s home. “The place was flattened,” he told me when I first met him, nearly four years later. “It was just rocks and destruction. There was fire everywhere.” They returned at dawn, with blankets to carry the dead. “We searched for our relatives,” he told me, “picking them up piece by

piece and wrapping them."

Across town, Ali Younes Muhammad Sultan, Sawsan's father, heard the news from his brother. Everyone at the dinner had been killed: Zeidan and his wife, Nofa; Araj, Ghazala and their four children; Zeidan's adult son Hussein, Hussein's wife and their six children; Zeidan's adult son Hassan, Hassan's wife and their two children; and Sawsan, their own beloved daughter. Sultan and his wife went to the hospital where Sawsan's remains were taken.

"If it weren't for her clothes, I wouldn't have even known it was her," he later told me. "She was just pieces of meat. I recognized her only because she was wearing the purple dress that I bought for her a few days before. It's indescribable. I can't put it into words. My wife — she didn't even know whether to go to her daughter, or the rest of the family first. It is just too hard to describe. We're still in denial and disbelief. To this day, we cannot believe what happened. That day changed everything for us."

Abdul Aziz Ahmed Araj, right, and his brother Saddam amid the ruins of the warehouse where their brother and other family members were killed.Ivor Prickett for The New York Times

2. "Pattern of life"

In the immediate aftermath of the strike, Defense Department officials lauded it as an intelligence coup. But doubts quickly began to surface. A series of ISIS videos taken at the hospital and the strike site was posted online, showing the burned and bloody corpses of children. The coalition opened a civilian casualty review.

The Pentagon's review process is one of the few, if indeed not the only, means by which the U.S. military holds itself to account with regard to civilian casualties as it executes its air wars. The coalition has conducted at least 2,866 such assessments since the air war against ISIS in Iraq and Syria began in August 2014, but little more than a dozen of the resulting reports have ever been made public until now. Instead, each month, the U.S.-led

coalition publishes a summary report, often a series of sentence-long synopses of the findings with little more than the date of the allegation, the general location and what the assessment concluded: that the allegation is “credible” — that is, military investigators deemed it “more likely than not” that an airstrike caused civilian casualties — or that it is “noncredible.”

[As I previously reported in The Times](#), over the past three years, I obtained more than 1,300 of these credibility assessments through the Freedom of Information Act. The reports cover allegations surrounding airstrikes that took place between September 2014 and January 2018. What I saw after studying them was not a series of tragic errors but a pattern of impunity: of a failure to detect civilians, to investigate on the ground, to identify causes and lessons learned, to discipline anyone or find wrongdoing that would prevent these recurring problems from happening again. It was a system that seemed to function almost by design to not only mask the true toll of American airstrikes but also legitimize their expanded use.

Capt. Bill Urban, a spokesman for U.S. Central Command, said the Pentagon worked diligently to prevent the loss of innocent life. “Mistakes do happen,” he said, “whether based upon incomplete information or misinterpretation of the information available. And we try to learn from these mistakes.” But he contested the idea that the Pentagon acted with impunity, noting that “the lawfulness of a military strike is judged upon the information reasonably available to the striking forces at the time of the decision to strike.”

[The documents](#) reveal how unreliable that information often was. “White bags” of “ammonium nitrate” at a “homemade explosives factory” were most likely bags of cotton at a gin. A supposed ISIS headquarters was the longtime home of two brothers and their wives and children. An “adult male associated with ISIS” was actually an “elderly female.” A man with a weapon “on his left shoulder” actually had no weapon. Males on five motorcycles driving “quickly” and “in formation” — displaying the “signature” of an imminent attack — were just guys on motorbikes. A “heavy object” being

dragged into a building was in fact a child.

The documents also offer a window into the process by which strikes are authorized and examined after the fact. The Pentagon's assessment of what happened at Yabisat, for instance, makes clear that one official who reviewed the intelligence, the U.S.A.I.D. "representative," warned that there could be civilian casualties. But it nonetheless states that "intelligence associated with the target did not reveal civilian pattern of life" at the target and that video taken before the strike did not reveal "any obvious sign of human activity" in the vicinity. (A spokesman for U.S.A.I.D. declined to comment and referred questions about the case to the Pentagon.) The report also found that the Yabisat strike "fully complied" with the law of war and even "went beyond what is required in terms of harm mitigation" by being conducted at night. Finally, the report recommended that a full investigation be conducted into the "target development and intelligence process" used to determine the "pattern of life" of civilians.

But the records can show us only so much. They tell us what the air war looked like from above, to the officials carrying it out. I knew that to fully understand what was happening, I also needed to see it from the ground. That is the subject of this article. I have spent the past five years traveling throughout the theaters of war in Iraq, Syria and Afghanistan, trying to gain a clear picture of the ground reality created by the air campaign. Starting in 2016, as the U.S. effort against ISIS intensified, I was in cities and towns including Mosul and Hawija, Raqqa and Tokhar. In 2019, as airstrikes occurred at a record pace in Afghanistan, I was meeting families from Helmand, Kandahar and Nangarhar, who gave testimony of night raids and airstrikes that turned even supporters of the embattled Afghan government away.

On the ground, I found a pattern of life that was very different from the one that the military described in its credibility assessments, and documented death rates that vastly exceeded U.S. Central Command's own numbers. I

also came away with a grim understanding of how America's new high-tech air war looks to civilians who live beneath it — people in Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan trying to raise families, earn a living and stay away from the fighting as best they can. For them, the sight of aerial surveillance drones patrolling the sky overhead is common. It might even provide comfort, suggesting that they were being carefully observed before any action was taken. But they also have come to understand that on occasion, and with no warning, a bomb might pierce the sky, inexplicably targeting their homes, killing their families and neighbors in a terrifying instant.

And they knew that if this were to happen, it was unlikely anyone would ever tell them why.

The Survivors

Many of the strikes that killed civilians left behind survivors. To this day, some struggle with injuries and disabilities, others with unanswered questions about why they or their loved ones were targeted. According to the U.S. military's post-strike assessments, some were hit because of faulty intelligence, some because of secondary explosions and some because military planners calculated that these casualties were acceptable. Few if any have ever been contacted by the U.S. military to offer an explanation or a condolence payment for their losses.

Photographs by Ivor Prickett Reporting by Azmat Khan Additional reporting by Momen Muhanned

Date of Strike April 29, 2016

Location Al Kaffa'at Alththania neighborhood, East Mosul

Civilian Casualties 4



This strike targeted the notorious Australian ISIS recruiter Neil Prakash, who was believed to be staying at a bed-down location in Mosul. American officials confirmed that the strike killed Prakash, as well as four civilians. But several months later, Prakash was found alive, trying to cross into Turkey. Among those killed was a local professor, Ziad Khalaf Awad. Among the injured was Hassan Aleiwi Muhammad Sultan, pictured above, now 16, who was playing soccer nearby and still has shrapnel in his spinal cord. His family can barely afford his wheelchair. Despite concluding long ago that four civilians were killed, the U.S.-led coalition has never contacted any of the survivors.

3. "Extraordinary technology"

In recent decades, the United States has fundamentally transformed its approach to war, replacing American troops on the ground with an arsenal of aircraft directed by controllers sitting at computers, often thousands of miles

away. This transformation reached full force in the final years of the Obama administration, amid the deepening unpopularity of the forever wars that had claimed the lives of more than 6,000 American service members. Fewer American troops on the ground meant fewer American deaths, which meant fewer congressional hearings about the progress of the wars, or lack thereof. It also meant fewer reporters paying attention to the impacts of the war effort on the local civilian population. If America could precisely target and kill the right people while taking the greatest possible care not to harm the wrong ones, then those on the home front would have little cause for concern.

From Iraq and Syria to Somalia and Afghanistan, air power allowed coalition forces to take territory from ISIS and the Taliban, and drone strikes provided a means to engage Al Qaeda, Al Shabab and Boko Haram in areas not declared as official battlefields. Military officials touted the precision of these campaigns, based on meticulously gathered intelligence, technological wizardry, carefully designed bureaucratic hurdles and extraordinary restraint. By April 2016, the Pentagon was reporting that American airstrikes in Iraq and Syria had killed 25,000 ISIS fighters, while resulting in the deaths of just 21 civilians. "With our extraordinary technology," President Barack Obama said that year, "we're conducting the most precise air campaign in history."

At the time, I had just finished an investigation into the U.S. government's claims about the schools it had built in Afghanistan, and I knew that there was often a divergence between what officials say and the reality on the ground. The numbers of civilian casualties given by the coalition seemed hard to believe. So I decided to travel to the sites of some airstrikes and see what I could find out.

In August 2016, coalition forces hit Qaiyara, a suburb about 45 miles south of Mosul, with multiple strikes, freeing it from ISIS control, and in the immediate aftermath, the Pentagon did not acknowledge a single civilian death. I arrived in Qaiyara a little over a month after the strikes had stopped.

The air around the town was still thick with black smoke — ISIS fighters had set some oil wells ablaze before retreating north toward Mosul. In the center of Qaiyara, the destruction was absolute. Almost every major building or significant piece of city infrastructure had been hit — the bridges, the water sanitation plant, the railway station, the furniture market, the bazaar. At the remains of Qaiyara's sloping soccer stadium, I saw children use metal sheets as sleds. The residential area was also devastated: On each block, one or two structures had been reduced to rubble.

I stopped to talk to some local people in front of a destroyed home. They knew the family who used to live there. This was the residence of Ali Khalaf al-Wardi and his family, they told me, as they explained what happened. When the Iraqi Army was advancing toward Qaiyara, fleeing ISIS fighters left explosives caches around the city; Ali, believing that one of those caches was in the house next door, immediately began packing up his family to leave. But they didn't move quickly enough. A coalition airstrike hit the neighbor's house, bringing down the Wardi family home. Six civilians were killed, including Ali; his 5-year-old son, Qutada; his 14-year-old daughter, Enaas; and his 18-year-old daughter, Ghofran.

After this, I went to the sites of nine other airstrikes in Qaiyara. All were in residential areas. Locals told me that the airstrikes had rained down daily, particularly in the center of the town. These strikes were so continuous that families frequently slept in shifts in case there was a bombing. At least five of the sites I visited had involved civilian casualties, with at least 29 people killed. In many cases ISIS had already evacuated the homes nearby that were the targets.

It was clear from just one reporting trip that there was something very wrong with the coalition's air war. I teamed up with Anand Gopal, a journalist with a background in statistical research, and together we mapped out a plan to conduct a systematic ground investigation of airstrikes in Qaiyara. In the coming months, I returned again and again, verifying what I had learned. I

broadened my research area to include the town of Shura and the Aden district of East Mosul. I identified impact sites, learned how to distinguish airstrikes from other attacks, interviewed loved ones and survivors, collected names and photographs of the dead, analyzed satellite imagery and scoured social media. Our survey grew to include 103 strike sites, and what we found was sobering: One in five of the bombings resulted in a civilian death, a rate 31 times higher than what the coalition was claiming at the time. What's more, in about half the strikes that killed civilians, we found no discernible ISIS target nearby. The strikes appeared to have been based on poor or outdated intelligence. It's true that at that point, we were limited in what we could know about the intended target of a strike. I had military sources, and in some cases I was able to interview local informants on the ground. But my ability to discern pre-strike intelligence was constrained by what these sources would tell me.

Soon, however, I gained deeper insight into the targeting process. On one of my trips, I met an Iraqi man named Basim Razzo, who survived a 2015 strike on his East Mosul home that killed his wife, his daughter, his brother and his nephew. U.S. intelligence had identified the Razzo home as a car-bomb factory. Razzo desperately wanted to know why his family had been targeted so precisely, and to clear his name. After learning about his case, I filed a request under the Freedom of Information Act for the civilian casualty assessment related to this strike. To expedite the process, which can sometimes take years, I argued in my request that there was risk of imminent harm to Razzo, because survivors of U.S. bombings can fall under suspicion of ties to enemy groups. Within months, I had a dozen partly redacted pages.

Basim Razzo. Giles Price for The New York Times

This was the first report I saw, and it was a revelation to me. My hunch that something had gone very wrong had been correct. The Razzos had been monitored for just 95 minutes over the course of several weeks before the

target was authorized, and confirmation bias ran rampant. It didn't matter that, as the report noted, "no overtly nefarious activity was observed." Whoever analyzed the surveillance footage interpreted the normal activity of the household through an incriminating lens, noting, for instance, that when Razzo or his brother opened the gate to allow a guest to enter, this was consistent with the tactics, techniques and procedures of an ISIS headquarters; or that the apparent absence of women confirmed that this was an ISIS facility (because Mosul was under ISIS control at the time, the women in the Razzo household rarely went out). There was seemingly nothing the Razzos could have done to persuade the people watching them that they were innocent. In the end, the report acknowledged that perhaps the target may have been confused for a compound next door. ([Gopal and I wrote about Razzo's case in a 2017 article for this magazine called "The Uncounted."](#))

Seeing the report for Razzo's case persuaded me that there was much more to know about the conduct of the air war. If this was the process and intelligence used for a deliberately planned airstrike, vetted at the highest levels, what would the intelligence look like in all the tens of thousands of other strikes, many of them carried out much more quickly than this one? I began filing requests for the thousands of credibility assessments of other strikes in which civilians had reportedly been killed.

The Survivors: Kareema Khalid Suleiman

Date of Strike June 13, 2017

Location Al Shifaa, Mosul

Civilian Casualties 33





The strike occurred during an especially heavy period of shelling in 2017, as the coalition was driving ISIS out of Mosul. The large extended family of Kareema Khalid Suleiman, pictured here, had gathered for safety in a house in the Al Shifaa neighborhood, but as the bombs rained down, the home was hit, killing 33 people. Suleiman was the only survivor. As the house was consumed in flames, she managed to crawl out of a tiny hole, but no one else could make it. Behind her, a younger relative had managed to make it partly up the staircase. "My last words to her were: 'Please, I'm going to help you. Come to me.' And when they pulled me out, she was closing her eyes, and she died." After the strike, the Pentagon asserted that only 11 civilians were killed.

4. "We were the sacrifice"

While I waited for those requests to work their way through the system, I returned to Iraq. Razzo and his family had lived on the eastern side of Mosul. In early 2018, I returned to investigate the western side of the city. I wanted to survey the Old City in West Mosul the same way I had the eastern side of the city. My intent was to go methodically from door to door, interviewing locals and documenting each impact area I found. But in the Old City, there were hardly any doors left to knock on. Much of the area had been reduced to rubble. To clear space for vehicles to pass, heavy machinery had been brought in to push the scattered concrete blocks, household debris and even some body parts into little hills of wreckage on either side of the roads.

Near the remains of Al Nuri Grand Mosque, I came upon a makeshift cemetery. While the battle was raging, families quickly buried loved ones here, marking the graves with rocks so they could return and properly lay them to rest when it was safe. Several men had gathered, and I asked them about the costs of liberation from ISIS. One of them, Mudhar Abdul Qadir, stepped forward to share his thoughts. He had lived his whole life in Mosul and was furious over what had happened to his hometown. "We were the sacrifice," he told me. "We paid the price with our bodies."

Like Qadir, many of the people I met on this side of the city refused to call it liberation. In their eyes, the government in Baghdad and its American partners made a deliberate choice to punish Mosul and its civilians. As evidence, they pointed to the fact that in every major offensive against ISIS, from Ramadi to Falluja, the coalition had mostly allowed ISIS a longtime convention of war: retreat. This enabled the separation of local civilian populations from combatants. As the coalition closed in on ISIS positions in West Mosul in 2017, everyone assumed this would happen again. But it didn't. This time, there would be no escape, no path to Syria. This would be the end. Around Mosul, Iraqi and militia forces cut off every exit, trapping civilians with combatants as they made their last stand. Faced with the overwhelming asymmetry of air power and certain defeat, ISIS took swaths of the population hostage. As coalition missiles and bombs rained down, they seemed to kill indiscriminately.

There were widespread reports that coalition strikes supporting the campaign to drive ISIS from the city had killed civilians. Qadir wanted me to see the remains of one of them, which destroyed a home where Tariq Khalil Ibrahim Sanjari and his family were sleeping in April 2017. Although it was only a few meters away from where we stood, it took Qadir and me 30 minutes of climbing over wreckage until we reached the blast area. The debris was pushed up so high around the house, it was like peering down into a basement.

Over the next few months, I was able to conduct multiple interviews with those who lived in the house and the neighborhood, and from these I formed an initial picture of what happened. The Sanjari family had rented this house because their own had been damaged during the war. On the night of the strike, 27 people were asleep in five bedrooms. A little after 12:30 a.m., Sanjari's son Emad Tariq Khalil Ibrahim woke up struggling to breathe and realized he was partly buried under concrete. After removing the blocks on top of him, he found his wife and two sons. He heard a voice and began searching for other survivors. The lower half of his brother Mahmoud Tariq

Khalil was pinned under a block of concrete and steel bars. "I don't know how to describe the moaning sounds he was making," Emad told me softly. "I started by hugging my brother, and I kissed his forehead. I told him: 'Don't worry, you're going to be OK. We're going to save you.' He didn't say anything. He just moaned."

Neighbors who came to help spent more than three hours working to free Mahmoud and the others, but the block was too heavy to lift. Emad could feel Mahmoud's heartbeat slowing, his body temperature going down. He understood what was happening. Emad kissed his brother, said a prayer and left the room.

Using a drill hammer, a metal-cutting tool and a car jack, the neighbors worked until 1 p.m., rescuing survivors and recovering bodies. Then they took the dead, seven in all, for burial. A year later, when I spoke to him, Emad still could not understand what happened. The family heard planes overhead "24 hours a day," he told me. What were those planes doing if not providing intelligence that dozens of civilians were in this house? ISIS had previously briefly occupied the house next door to this home, he said, but abandoned it about 20 days to one month before the strike. That home did not appear to be hit.

"What I care about the most, more than anything else, is to help prevent what happened to my family from happening to anyone else," Emad told me. "Can you uncover the truth about why this house was hit?"

The Survivors: Yousef Hashim Ali

Date of Strike Feb. 19, 2017

Location Al Shifaa, Mosul

Civilian Casualties At least 23



This strike targeted an apartment complex near the Tahir building in Mosul, where both ISIS members and civilians lived. Down the street was another residential complex where ISIS members' families lived. The attack on the first complex triggered the explosion of a fuel truck near the second, resulting in fire that destroyed the second complex. The strike was authorized despite numerous "collateral concerns" noted in the report: that there was a regular pedestrian and vehicle presence around the target, at a "moderate to high transient traffic," and that residences and apartments were near the target. The report concluded that 10 civilians were killed. On the ground, the death toll was much higher. I documented the deaths of 20 civilians in and around the first building, including six members of the family of Yousef Hashim Ali, pictured here standing on the rubble. Dozens of others in the second building burned to death or were severely injured.

5. "Post-strike analysis"

Uncovering the truth was an almost insurmountable task without the documents. By June 2018, Centcom had denied expedited processing for every single request I submitted. So with lawyers from the Reporters Committee for Freedom of the Press, I filed a lawsuit. By early October, the first batch of casualty reports arrived. Among them were documents from 35 strikes in Iraq in which the Pentagon concluded it was credible that civilians had been killed.

I printed out the more than 300 pages of these reports and began marking them up with questions for military sources. The assessments were littered with acronyms and military slang, made all the more incomprehensible by a steady series of redactions. But just as with the initial document I received regarding the strike on Basim Razzo's home, these records contained much that was revealing about the nature of America's air war.

In one especially disquieting assessment, I found a chat log of a conversation among military personnel as they carried out an airstrike in Mosul: They talked about it as if it were a video game, with one saying that the area was "poppin'" with targets, before realizing, just as the chat ended, that they could see children. Another assessment described a strike in which the operators chose to drop a disproportionately large weapon so they could save smaller bombs for later use. The resulting explosion took out two civilian vehicles along with the ISIS vehicle they were targeting.

The documents were especially illuminating when combined with independent ground reporting, something the credibility assessments themselves usually did not contain. None of the investigations, I noted as I turned the pages, included the kind of survivor interviews I had been conducting. The closest thing I found was a description in one document of an interview that Special Operations forces conducted with civilians who had recently fled from an area controlled by ISIS, but it appeared that the intent of the questions was to determine possible ISIS targets to strike, not to glean any information about civilian casualties. Still, given the opportunity, the

people in the camp spoke up about the airstrike that killed their neighbors.

Perhaps this disconnect between the documents and the reality on the ground was also the reason the Centcom tally of civilian casualties was consistently lower than what I was finding. An example of this was provided by my visit, in late 2018, to Tokhar, Syria, the site of what was reportedly one of the largest mass-casualty events of the war. The Pentagon claimed that the 2016 strike had killed as many as 24 civilians, but some estimates ran much higher than that, possibly higher than 200. That would make the civilian death toll from the Tokhar strike larger than any other from a coalition airstrike during the war.

It had taken months to persuade the Turkish government to provide me permission to cross the border so I could travel to Tokhar. Now that we had clearance, we left Gaziantep, crossed the border into Syria and drove south. We arrived in Tokhar at noon. Everyone we spoke to recalled the incident. They recounted how, as the fighting between the Syrian Democratic Forces and ISIS grew more and more intense, some 200 villagers from homes near the front line trekked to the outer edge of Tokhar and took shelter in four homes, in a place far from the fighting. They assumed they would be safe there, because ISIS had not been near any of the homes.

But on July 19, coalition forces carried out a series of strikes. For each of the four houses, I wrote up the names of families that perished. The details were consistently corroborated by open-source information, local journalists and others. According to the count I made by speaking to survivors, which I verified over the coming months, at least 120 people died in the Tokhar strike. The interviews with survivors were harrowing. More than a dozen showed me debilitating injuries. Some told me that so many people were killed that there weren't enough young men left to pull the bodies from the rubble. It took nearly two weeks, and even then, some of the victims were never found.

When I returned to Gaziantep that night and opened my email, I found the

credibility assessment from the Tokhar strike waiting for me. Though a full investigation into the incident had been conducted, I received just a single page, a cover sheet of sorts that laid out the basics. A dynamic strike had been called in by a Special Operations force — I later learned from another source that it was Task Force 9 — in northern Syria. Members of Task Force 9, which was supporting the Syrian Democratic Forces, had received reports of ISIS fighters traveling in areas that were “devoid of civilians.” Concluding that the fighters were assembling for a counterattack against the S.D.F., the task force destroyed three “staging sites” and five vehicles. They were confident of having killed 85 ISIS fighters, but the assessment team later concluded that between seven and 24 civilians “may have been intermixed” with ISIS fighters. When I received several more mostly redacted pages from this report two years later, they indicated that the basis for this judgment was “post-strike analysis” and “S.D.F. source reporting.”

The divergence between what I saw in Tokhar and what I read in the Pentagon’s official report made me understand that the document trove I was assembling would need to be approached skeptically, and supplemented with reporting on the ground as often as possible. Between more trips to Iraq, Syria and Afghanistan, I filed for additional assessments, while studying the documents that were coming in steadily every other month or so. Although I could have published some records while waiting for others to be processed, to truly do justice to this, I knew I needed to be able to report out a greater number of them on the ground. Publishing a military document only allows you to see through its eyes in the sky — and from everything I had now learned through my years of reporting on America’s air war, that view alone is usually a dangerous one.

The Survivors: Ruzqaya

Date of Strike March 21, 2017

Location Islah al Zerai, Mosul

Civilian Casualties 1





Early one morning, a scrap vendor named Ali set out from his home in West Mosul with his trusty red cart, which he usually filled with cans, bottles and metal — whatever he might be able to sell. That day he was looking for a wheat-grinding machine to turn his family's wheat into flour. When he didn't return in the afternoon, his mother, Ruzqaya, pictured here, began to worry. She wound up searching for more than a month before she found his cart, near the site of a coalition airstrike that had targeted an ISIS mortar position. "The person pushing the cart appears to have been struck by ejecta from the blast," the military's credibility assessment states. "The person pushing the cart was not associated with the strike and is presumed to be a civilian." According to eyewitnesses, Ali died almost instantly from shrapnel to the head.

6. "To God we belong"

When the pandemic arrived in the spring of 2020, I had to pause my reporting in Iraq. I spent the time carefully assembling and analyzing the documents I had obtained. I hired two research assistants, Lila Hassan and Jeff Parrott, former students in the conflict-reporting course I teach at Columbia Journalism School, to help me build out the database further. Together we developed a plan for resuming my investigations as soon as travel restrictions lifted. By now, I could better understand the assessments I was reading and had much more material to work with. I had filed more FOIA requests, and they were progressing. Thousands more pages were rolling in, much faster than any one person could handle.

By late 2020, I also had a new type of information, one that could improve my on-the-ground reporting: After years of negotiation, U.S. military officials

had finally provided Airwars, a British nonprofit, with military coordinates of the impact sites for all of the credible incidents of civilian casualties it had acknowledged. Until then, it was often difficult to figure out the precise location of a strike listed in the Pentagon's releases or detailed in the assessments. The releases might say that a particular strike occurred "near Mosul," but this was practically useless. Even after I started receiving documents, precise location data was almost always redacted, as were most maps or images that would allow me to geolocate them. Now, because of Airwars, I had coordinates that purported to be accurate within 100 meters. I could use this data to go to a site where I knew a strike occurred and start asking questions.

By the time I received my second Covid shot, I had developed a methodology for how to do this. Before visiting a credible site, I would analyze the document to identify central details about the allegation, the intelligence, what the military concluded the target was, how it was authorized to be bombed, what was observed and recorded in footage, chats and mission reports, the casualties assessed and other details. Next, I would research the coordinates the military provided. I would analyze that location in historical satellite imagery, both from before the date of the strike and after it, to identify potential impact areas and examine whether anything matched the target description in the document, or whether it was possible that the coordinates were incorrect.

I decided to start with Mosul. I wanted to sample a large number of sites, and this would take time. Mosul was a place where I had developed the kind of reporting network that would enable me to work safely for several months. To prepare for my visit, I hired two students from the University of Mosul's department of translation, Momen Muhanned and Zainab Alfakheri, and trained them in some of the basic techniques of investigative journalism.

According to the records, there were 90 credible incidents of civilian casualties in and around Mosul. Some I had previously been to, but many

were new to me. We started by examining the area of each strike in local crowdsourced mapping tools to understand a little bit more about the neighborhood and its infrastructure. We also examined open-source material about the incident, such as the sources documented by Airwars, and we conducted our own searches for additional materials, such as ISIS propaganda videos documenting the aftermath of the bombing. (ISIS videos were considered fairly reliable in their accounts of civilian casualties, even by groups that opposed them.) We crosschecked my repository of videos of bombings uploaded by the coalition to see whether any were potential matches. We used the Wayback Machine and other internet-archiving sites to locate materials that may no longer be available elsewhere online. I put all these materials together and imported them into an app I could access on my phone in the field.

The Survivors: Abdul Hakeem Abdullah Hamash al-Aqeedi and Mustafa Hakeem Abdullah

Date of Strike Feb. 25, 2017

Location Wadi Hajar, West Mosul

Civilian Casualties 13





Following orders from ISIS to evacuate their West Mosul neighborhood, two brothers, Majid Mahmoud Ahmed and Firas Mahmoud Ahmed, were driving with their families in two cars across town. At the same time, coalition forces were monitoring surveillance video of the area, looking to strike what intelligence had indicated was an up-armored vehicle carrying a car bomb. An official mistakenly identified the brothers' cars as those carrying car bombs, and the strike was authorized. "I remember there was a big explosion, and I fainted," said Abdul Hakeem Abdullah Hamash al-Aqeedi,

pictured above. The cars were passing his house when the weapon hit. He lost an eye and had a plate put into his left leg. His son, Mustafa Hakeem Abdullah, had his left leg amputated from the thigh down. His nephew, who had been a nursing-school student, lost four toes on his left foot and one on his right foot and still has shrapnel in his leg. The brothers and their family members in the cars were all killed.

In early May, I arrived in Mosul and began visiting strike sites with Muhanned and a local security expert. Over the next two months, I was able to investigate 50 sites there. In each case, we began with the military's official coordinates of the site — even if content in the document or analysis of imagery suggested it may have been incorrect. In some cases, I was able to conclude the coordinates were inaccurate, but other details in the document or ground reporting led me to the actual site. Of the 50 sites I visited in Mosul, I was able to confirm the details of what happened and locate survivors or eyewitnesses in 27 of them.

At the coordinates, I would try to find the impact site. I would introduce myself to people nearby and ask if they knew what happened there, which often depended on whether they lived in the area during the time period in question. I understood that what people told me could be incorrect, whether because they misremembered or because they were not telling the truth, so I did everything I could to reduce the possibility of misinformation. There were several ways I did this. Though I was now going in with a clear picture of what the military said happened, I always kept this to myself at first and took pains not to ask leading questions. I also always sought out multiple perspectives from eyewitnesses. And I made sure that no one ever had advance notice that I was coming. That way, no one could set up interviews or scope out a place ahead of time. For a given site, there was sometimes extensive information from eyewitnesses in open-source materials that I could read ahead of time, but I was scrupulous about not contacting these individuals over Facebook or Twitter before I arrived, because I knew this could lead to a wider awareness that I was coming and potentially bias the

work. Evidence could potentially be doctored; stories could be aligned. Meeting people unplanned at the site would give me the most reliable testimony.

My arrival time depended on the neighborhood. For example, if it was a working-class neighborhood, I could go early in the morning and expect to find people out and about. But if it was a more affluent residential area, streets would be empty, and doorbells would go unanswered. Shop owners and workers could often easily recall basic details, although not usually specific dates. I would frame time around major events — “Eid al-Adha in 2017,” or “two weeks before this neighborhood was liberated,” right after ISIS destroyed the tomb of Nabi Yunus. After getting a sense of what occurred, I would narrow down the possibilities. It was important not to ask questions that were too specific, planting details it would be better to confirm unprompted. For example, instead of asking, “Was a man pushing a cart killed here?” I would inquire about the structure nearby and whether it was ever hit in a bombing.

Sometimes the people I interviewed described exactly what the report said analysts had observed in the footage — details that never appeared on social media. For example, a man in Mosul recalled an extremely specific scene: a missile landing across the street and missing an ISIS member in a wheelchair, followed by a second that hit him directly as he was fleeing, wounding children who had come running out of their homes. I did not ask him about the wheelchair, but his precise account gave me confidence to ask him to sit for an in-depth interview.

Consent involved more than just asking people whether they were willing to be interviewed or quoted. I would explain my objectives and told them specifically where their words, faces or voices might appear. I told them about my goal of making the American public more informed about the consequences of our wars. Many of the subjects were eager to help, immediately inviting me inside their homes, where sometimes interviews

could last several hours. I prioritized those who had firsthand accounts to offer: eyewitnesses and family members. Sometimes, though, they did not want to talk about what happened. They would say that it was better to forget, that this was God's plan. *Inna Lillahi wa inna ilayhi raji'un* — "To God we belong, and to him we shall return" — was a frequent refrain.

Other survivors had questions about the U.S. condolence-payment scheme and wondered in general whether it would be worth it to speak to me. Before interviews, I was always extremely clear that I was only a journalist, not an aid worker or a representative of an NGO. I explained that I could not be an advocate, but I could share their accounts, and — if they wished — I could include their contact information in my correspondence with the U.S. military. To my knowledge, none of them were ever contacted by a civilian casualty-assessment officer.

The Survivors: Rafi al-Iraqi

Date of Strike Jan. 6, 2017

Location Al Zirai, Mosul

Civilian Casualties 19



The target was a house assessed to be used exclusively as an ISIS “foreign fighter headquarters” and “artillery staging location.” But the blast destroyed several nearby homes as well, killing 16 civilians. Among them were three of the children of Rafi al-Iraqi, pictured above, a local trader from a leading Maslawi family. The only survivors of the strike, besides al-Iraqi, were his mother and his 12-year-old son. This was the second tragedy to befall the family. A year earlier, al-Iraqi’s wife was killed by ISIS.

7. “An unknown heavy object”

About two weeks after I arrived in Iraq, using the coordinates as my guide, I pulled up to an intersection in the Zanjili neighborhood of Mosul. According to the documents, this was where, in 2017, military officials observed ISIS fighters launching small surveillance drones from the top of a low-level building. They did not observe civilians or people walking by before firing. But just before the moment of impact, “two transient civilians were observed

to walk from an adjacent street into the collateral hazard area," and "one light truck" was seen driving toward the target.

The review concluded that the two pedestrians were killed, but it didn't indicate that any other civilians were affected. In Zanjili, I asked some men standing by a wall if they knew of any airstrikes in this area, before the liberation. They pointed to the structure across from us and began to describe how ISIS fighters had kicked out a family and moved into one of the three houses there, which was two stories. Every day for three days, they came here and operated the drones, which looked like homing pigeons. Some of the local children were fascinated by the little devices and would gather to watch them fly around. On the third day, the building was struck.

One of the men, Maher Mahmoud, was hit by the blast. When the bomb struck, he told me, he was walking past the house on his way to see a friend who sold cigarettes in secret. The blast was large. Mahmoud could feel shrapnel in the back of his head, but he knew there would be a second one, so he ran down a nearby road to hide under a van. The second blast was even larger than the first. If someone had managed to survive the first, he thought, there was no way he or she had survived the second.

As I continued to ask around, I found more and more people who wanted to share details about what happened in this strike. They listed names of those killed and injured. Some took their clothes off to show me their injuries. Huddled together over my computer in the guest room in a local home, we watched the video ISIS made of the aftermath of the bombing — a video that had gone totally unmentioned in the U.S. military's assessment — and asked for help confirming the identity of each person it showed. The scenes were grim and hard to watch. Children in backpacks, unrecognizable bodies, a terrified little girl in the hospital with big brown eyes. Someone told me that the girl was named Aseel. Her father had died, and her leg was injured, but she had survived the attack and was living with her mother across town in the Hermat neighborhood on the city's outskirts.

When we got to the house, there was a large crowd of children outside. The interior was painted pink. Aseel was several years older now, shy but smiling. Her mother allowed us to photograph the deep scar on her left leg. She told me that after the strike, she was stuck in the living room behind a door that wouldn't open. When she finally budged it, she could hear her children screaming. "I took my three kids and I ran," she said. "Two of my children were injured."

Aseel, whose father died in a strike in 2017. Ivor Prickett for The New York Times

It took several days to document the toll of this strike: 10 deaths and seven injuries. There were even more, people told us, but it would involve traveling to other neighborhoods, tracking down people who had moved away. I decided to stop and move on to the next incident.

Sometimes the documents gave me a specific, haunting detail to go in search of. One concerned a U.S. strike on a "declared hostile force" entering a "defensive fighting position" in Ramadi in November 2015. According to the records, operators had observed "enemy personnel" moving between a tree line and a building. A person was seen "dragging an unknown heavy object" into the building. As aircraft were being called away to other targets, they fired on the building. Upon review of the footage after the strike, an official in the command center reported that the heavy object was actually "a person of smaller stature" accompanying someone who was nearly twice as tall. A review was prompted, which acknowledged that this was "how a child would appear standing next to an adult." The age and gender of this smaller person could not be determined.

In June, I headed to Ramadi. I wanted to know who this smaller person was and what happened. The military provided coordinates for the strike that were purportedly accurate "within 100 meters," but they seemed to be at odds with the details in the document, which included a satellite image of the general area. Still, I went to the site, a shady grove, where I asked residents whether there had been any airstrikes on homes in the area.

People shook their heads. The nearest anyone could recall was by the waterside. I drove around a 400-meter radius, asking more people. Still nothing.

Next, I tried the area in the imagery, about a kilometer away. It was rural farmland bisected by a road, with houses scattered throughout. I knocked on the door of a rather large-looking home, just to ask permission to park there while I trudged through the farmland. A woman answered. She knew nothing about a nearby airstrike but said I should ask her husband, who wasn't home. I promised to return later and tried a house across the street. The man who answered said a family's home had been bombed somewhere in the vicinity, but they were not living in the home at the time.

In the house next door, I finally found a lead — a man who said his home had been hit and rebuilt. He had a daughter, a little girl who sat on my lap as we talked. When we walked out through his back garden to the area where the old house used to be, she held my hand. At the site of the old strike, I took some photos. The man told me he was not in Ramadi at the time, but he called his brother, who was. While we waited for the brother to arrive, I chatted with the man and played with his daughter. When the brother showed up, about half an hour later, I learned that the strike on this property took place on a different date. It was not the strike I was looking for.

In the end, this was one of the 25 out of 60 "credible" sites I visited in Iraq and Syria where I could not verify what happened. In this case, there were three likely scenarios to explain why: The "person of smaller stature" could have been the child of ISIS members, in which case I would be unlikely to ever learn anything about the child; he or she might have been part of a civilian family displaced by violence, now living far away, in a camp somewhere; or the location might be somewhere else altogether.

Another problem stemmed from unreliable record-keeping. In the organizational logs that track all strikes (where the military pulled the coordinates it shared with Airwars), a single "strike" could include more than

a dozen engagements lumped together. An official within the air campaign explained to me that this approach to accounting was in part due to the overwhelming number of airstrikes the coalition carried out in Iraq and Syria — it was simply too hard to track them all in the main logs. Therefore, in a case where a single “strike” actually contained multiple engagements, accessing the coordinates for each one required a deeper level of data than what was present in the logs. As a result, fair claims by survivors of strikes have often been rejected on the basis that the military had no record of a strike in that area.

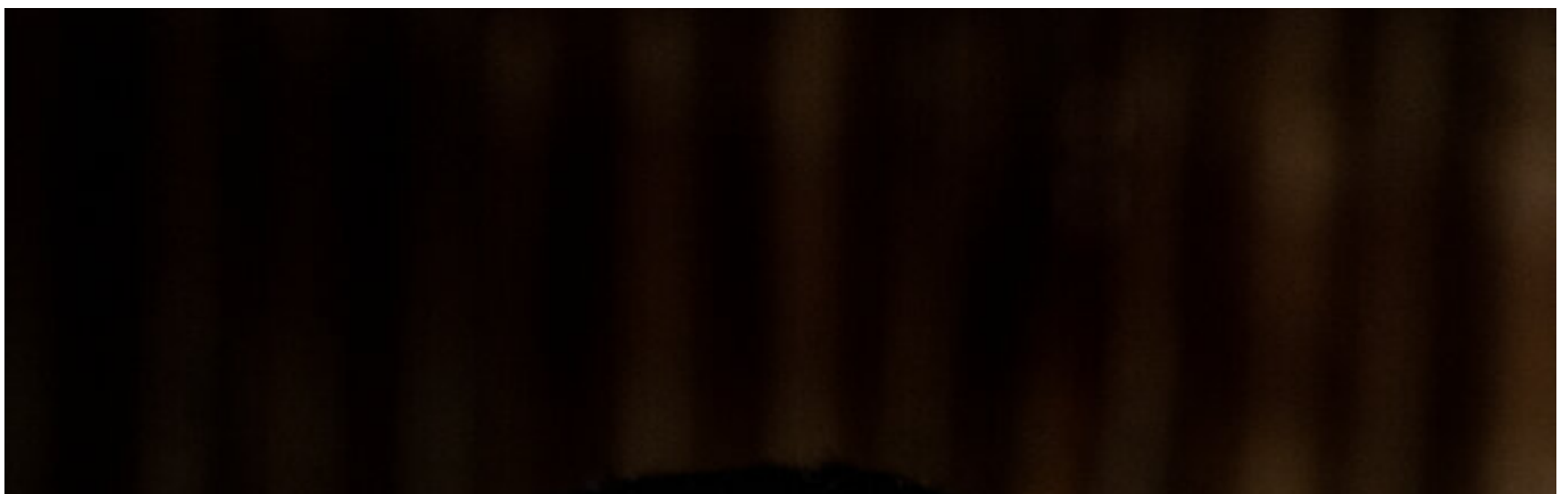
This was probably what happened in the case of the bombing I was trying to investigate in Ramadi. According to the documents, it was the 16th of 17 total “engagements” that had taken place “in and around Ramadi” on Nov. 13, 2015. All of them together were considered one strike. There could be 16 other specific sites to investigate around Ramadi. But where exactly? I had no way of knowing. I had no way of finding the small person who had been mistaken for a heavy object. I had no way of knowing if he or she was alive or dead.

The Survivors: Younes Muhammad Thanoun

Date of Strike Nov. 6, 2016

Location Near Shahid-Yunis As Sab, Mosul

Civilian Casualties 4





This strike was intended to hit a car carrying members of ISIS, but the explosion was so large that it destroyed two nearby cars as well. In one of them, Younes Muhammad Thanoun, pictured here, was traveling with his father. He was thrown from the vehicle and badly wounded. When he

realized that his father was trapped in the flaming car, he tried to drag himself back to the vehicle but was shot by an ISIS fighter, who feared that this activity would cause the jets to drop another bomb, he said. Younes's father and two other civilians died in the strike. According to the Pentagon's report, which included no finding of wrongdoing, the explosion was so large because a decision was made to save lower-collateral weapons for future strikes.

8. "Why did you kill them?"

The rules of war serve many purposes, from shaping concerted action out of the chaos of battle to constraining the technological advances that allow military planners to deliver death with almost boundless ease. They also play a psychological role. As one military official who served at a high level in the air war against ISIS told me, the principles that guide decision-making in war are designed to provide psychological comfort to those who must make the decisions.

That same logic could apply to ordinary Americans as well. Why do people consider the wars in Iraq, Syria and Afghanistan just? How can we know that the next wars will be, too? It is nearly certain that the technologies developed during these past wars will be put to use in the next conflict. Knowing that the American military planners in charge of our new high-tech systems of air war are governed by commitments to specific principles can provide us comfort in the humanity and morality of our government's actions.

In my quest to understand why American bombs landed where they did, though, I often found myself in the uncomfortable position of having to explain how these principles actually played out in practice.

If there was a single moment in which I most struggled with this, it was during an interview in June in Al Tanak, a neighborhood on the outskirts of West Mosul. In 2017, military planners identified a home where ISIS fighters slept — a "bed-down location" — based on reports from five sources. The

structure was a residential home and thus had been on a restricted targeting list, until the military concluded it was exclusively used by ISIS. Its protected status was removed, and the target was approved.

But on the day of the planned strike, observers saw something they did not expect: three children on the roof. Their presence raised questions about whether the house was being exclusively used by ISIS, and the strike package was returned to the targeting team for further evaluation. The next day, the target's "casualty estimation worksheet" was updated: Three children, who probably lived there, were also included.

This was not an error. According to U.S. rules of engagement, military planners can knowingly kill civilians, including children, if the anticipated casualty rate is not excessive in relation to the anticipated military advantage of destroying the strike target.

Observers continued to watch the house, and now they thought they saw something even more dangerous: a "[redaction] coming from the target" led them to believe ISIS was manufacturing weapons there. Not long after weapons were fired, children were seen south of the compound, and a screener watching the video observed that "one possible child was carried out of the strike location," loaded into a vehicle and driven to a medical facility. They concluded that three ISIS members were killed, two were wounded and one child was injured.

Not long afterward, an ISIS-linked media agency tweeted that 11 civilians were killed in Al Tanak. The Pentagon investigators acknowledged this but also noted that the "degree may be significantly exaggerated given the source."

How many died? Last June, with the document loaded on my phone and curious children swarming us, Momen and I knocked on doors on a residential block in Al Tanak. I asked a woman if there had been any bombings that killed civilians in the area. She pointed down the street and

told me that 11 members of a family had been killed by an explosion, and only one member had survived, a little girl. But the house next door was also hit, the woman said, and another girl was injured by the bombing. I could talk to them and find out more.

One of the Younes daughters peering out from the gate to their house. The house on the right was being rebuilt after it was destroyed in an airstrike.Ivor Prickett for The New York Times

I thanked the woman and went to the green-gated house a little farther down the road. There, Obaid Abdullah Younes and his wife, Nisreen Abdullah Younes, invited me inside to talk. Nisreen said Fatima, her daughter, was 3 months old when the bomb hit. "Something fell on her head and made her like this," her mother told me, gesturing toward a 4-year-old girl who was writhing on the floor, her mouth open. As we talked, curious neighbors wandered in without knocking. They all had different theories about why the house next door was hit. It made no sense. The family had lived in the neighborhood for 40 years. Everyone knew them, they said, and they had nothing to do with ISIS. Maybe it was the ISIS bunk house across the street, even though it had been vacated before the strike and untouched. Or maybe it was the motorcycle that was parked outside, or the engine in front of the house stripped for spare parts. Whatever the theory, no one would say a bad word about the family of Muhammad Ahmed Muhammad Muhammad Mousa.

I asked if they knew where the lone survivor, whose name was Rahaf, had gone. Nisreen said yes: She had gone to live with her grandparents, whose house was only a short drive away. One of their children rode in the car with Momen and me to show us where.

Fatima was disabled after an airstrike hit a neighbor's house when she was 3 months old.Ivor Prickett for The New York Times

Mousa's sister Katbeeah Ahmed had an immediate warmth about her. She smiled, invited us into her guest room and gave us ice water in a delicate bowl. I began my interview in my normal manner, telling her that I was a

journalist trying to understand what happened in incidents that harmed civilians. I said I wanted to ask her questions about difficult things, but that if I asked anything that was hurtful, she could say no at any time. She said to ask whatever I wanted.

Her daughter Esraa was married to her brother's son, and so Katbeeah had lost more than just her brother, she said. She lost her daughter, who was her best friend, and grandchildren, and nephews and nieces. After the bombing, neighbors heard the sound of what they thought was a cat screaming from underneath the rubble. They lifted the blocks and found Rahaf.

That night, Katbeeah told me, Mousa and the family had planned to come to her house for a meal. They were poor and often could barely afford to eat. They died without eating dinner, she said. Her brother formerly worked as a guard in Badush prison but left the job after ISIS took over. Maa'n, her daughter's husband, was a nursing student but had to leave school as well. Mousa was excited for liberation. He kept a TV hidden in his house, against ISIS strictures, and watched the Iraqi news eagerly for updates on the advancing Iraqi Army.

I asked her why she thought the bomb hit her brother's home.

Katbeeah Ahmed lost many people in her family to the Al Tanak airstrike. Ivor Prickett for The New York Times

Katbeeah was certain it was some kind of mistake. A random strike gone wrong. Still, she and the other family members who came to listen to the interview shared the different theories they and neighbors had speculated on. An ISIS truck was parked underneath a tree or had been driving by. Maybe they meant to target that. On their roof was a tanoor, a mud oven to make bread. It used a cheaper oil that burned deeply. Maybe they saw its heat from the sky.

I wondered if the redacted item that was "coming from the target" was smoke or a heat signature from the oven.

Nearly an hour and a half into our conversation, I told her about the document. I summed up the initial description: that they believed the house was being used by ISIS for military purposes. Then I told her that, before striking, they saw three children on the roof.

Katbeeah's face changed. The children would go up on the roof when they got cold, she said quietly. It was January. The house did not have gas. On the roof they could warm up under the sun.

I described how after seeing the children, the target was re-evaluated, and they saw something coming from the house that made them believe it was a weapons manufacturing facility.

Katbeeah's granddaughter Rahaf, 10, was the sole survivor of the airstrike in Al Tanak. Ivor Prickett for The New York Times

She encouraged me to go out into the neighborhood and ask about her family. "Everyone will tell you the exact same thing," she said. "It's impossible."

I asked Katbeeah what she would want to tell the people who wrote the document and who did this bombing.

"I am on fire now," she said, her voice robbed of all its signature warmth. "Why did you kill them? They were innocent. They didn't do anything." Now she was weeping. "They were turned into just flesh. Their house wasn't suspicious at all. I ask now, I want to know the reason. There wasn't any manufacturing facility."

Katbeeah was sobbing. I apologized for asking. My own voice was cracking now. She told me that she was grateful, that they wanted to know this, that she was happy I was investigating their deaths, that she has never forgotten them.

"I can still see their shadows in front of me," she said.

I told Katbeeah I wanted to ask her one last thing. I described how military observers believed that the strike was acceptable because the military advantage gained by eliminating an ISIS weapons manufacturing facility would be worth killing the children. What did she think of the decision?

"But they didn't gain any advantage," she said. "The only thing they did is they killed the children."

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