



Netherlands airstrikes in Iraq and Syria: Towards improved transparency and public accountability

About Airwars

[Airwars](#) is a non-aligned, not for profit group based in Europe and the Middle East, which monitors international airstrikes against Daesh and other elements in both Iraq and Syria. We also track and assess all known allegations of civilian deaths from Russian and Coalition strikes – and publish our findings in an accessible, open-source database. Funding is primarily via the Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust and the Open Society Foundation.

Airwars has swiftly become a trusted resource for information on the war against Daesh, widely cited by international journalists and researchers. All declared strikes by Coalition members and Russia are cross-referenced by us against known claims of civilian casualties – allowing journalists and researchers to engage locally with their governments on transparency and accountability issues.

We maintain fair contacts with many militaries participating in the anti-Daesh war. And we have engaged with governments – both publicly and privately – on civilian casualty concerns. Airwars has also assisted journalists and researchers in many nations including the Netherlands, the UK, Canada, Australia, the United States and Denmark.

The Netherlands anti-Daesh campaign: transparency concerns

The present parliamentary debate on possible airstrikes in Syria also represents an opportunity after 16 months of airstrikes to assess Ministerie van Defensie reporting of anti-Daesh actions so far; to compare such reporting with that of close allies; and for MPs to consider how transparency and public accountability for Dutch military actions might be improved moving forward.

As Committee Members will know, the Netherlands began military operations against so-called Islamic State on October 7th 2014. According to the Ministerie van Defensie, to early February 2016 Dutch F-16s had released more than 1,300 bombs, missiles and cannon shells against Daesh targets.¹ According to our analysis, this makes the Netherlands the fourth most active partner in the military campaign - after the United States, the UK and France.

¹ Written statement from senior Ministerie van Defensie spokesperson to Airwars, February 3rd 2016

Transparency of action by Coalition member

	Frequency of reports	Locations given	Date of strikes given	Munitions/ strike numbers released
Canada	As they occur	Yes	Yes	Yes
UK	Weekly	Intermittent	Yes	Yes
US	Daily*	Occasional	Yes*	Yes
France	Weekly	Occasional	Within a range	Yes
Denmark	Weekly	No	Within a range	Yes
Australia	Monthly	No	No	Yes
Saudi Arabia	Occasional	No	Occasional	Occasional
Jordan	Occasional	No	Occasional	Occasional
UAE	Occasional	No	Occasional	Occasional
Netherlands	Weekly	No	No	Occasional
Belgium	Occasional	No	No	No
Bahrain	None	No	No	No

* US reporting subsumed into coalition daily reports

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Despite being an advanced democracy with membership both of the European Union and NATO, the Netherlands has also been one of the least transparent partners in the 12-member Coalition - a situation which has further deteriorated over time. It is an uncomfortable fact that Saudi Arabia and the UAE have on occasion issued more information on their anti-Daesh air campaigns than has the Netherlands.²

Transparency is important, because according to the Coalition each nation is individually liable for the civilians it kills or injures. And in the increasingly chaotic skies of Iraq or Syria – with hundreds of aircraft from more than a dozen nations now bombing – civilians on the ground deserve to know who is responsible when errors occur. Already the Coalition, the Assad regime and Russia have bombed the same Syrian cities on the same day – a significant challenge when attributing responsibility for civilian deaths.

Yet the Netherlands has always refused to state either where or when its aircraft bomb in Iraq, citing *'operational security'* concerns. Beginning in October 2014 the Ministerie van Defensie would instead report weekly on the number of bombs and missiles dropped in Iraq – a metric which is nevertheless useful in determining operational tempo.³

² Saudi Arabia along with Jordan and the UAE have on occasion issued detailed press releases relating to particular missions and targets in Syria. See for example the following official UAE release [in Arabic] detailing an airstrike on Daesh oil pipelines <http://www.wam.ae/ar/news/emirates-international/1395277583379.html>

³ *'Actueel: nieuwsberichten'*, Ministerie van Defensie, at <https://www.defensie.nl/actueel/nieuws?pagina=1>

Until October 21st 2014 the US-led Coalition also disclosed the dates on which Dutch aircraft bombed – until such reporting ceased following pressure from unnamed allies. So for example, on October 11th 2014, the Coalition states in its daily report that “*the Kingdom of the Netherlands participated in these airstrikes.*”⁴

From June 2015 the Netherlands Defence Ministry ceased reporting even the number of munitions released each week, from now on noting only that more than 10, 15 or 20 ‘missions’ might have taken place. Media requests to restore the weekly reporting of munitions dropped were refused.

Other nations in the Coalition have not felt bound by such restrictions, with the UK, US, Canada and France all regularly reporting where and when their own aircraft strike. In the view of Airwars, this is vital if nations are to be held publicly accountable for their actions.

Disclosure by others and weapon releases

On only two occasions have the locations and dates of Dutch airstrikes in Iraq been revealed – on neither occasion by the Netherlands itself. Following a strike on Fallujah on July 25th 2015, France later reported it had carried out the mission with Dutch assistance: “*Cette mission fut réalisée conjointement avec des avions américains et hollandais.*”⁵

And in September 2015, Airwars in collaboration with RTL Netherlands was able to show that according to a declassified CENTCOM document, Dutch aircraft had been implicated in a possible civilian casualty incident ten months earlier. This problem event was never publicly disclosed by the government:⁶

Dutch aircraft were suspected of killing two civilians in an incident on the morning of December 26th 2014. According to the [CENTCOM] document, “*while conducting dynamic coalition airstrikes on ISIL fighters and technical vehicles NLD F-16AM [ie a Dutch F-16] may have unintentionally struck two unidentified persons on motorcycles who entered the target area during the strikes.*” These claims of civilian deaths were deemed serious enough to trigger a rare formal investigation into the event. This

⁴ ‘Oct. 11: U.S. Military Conducts Airstrikes Against ISIL in Syria and Iraq,’ CENTCOM, October 11th 2014, at <http://www.centcom.mil/en/news/articles/oct.-11-u.s.-military-conducts-airstrikes-against-isil-in-syria-and-iraq>

⁵ ‘Chammal : Point de situation au 31 juillet 2015,’ Ministère de la Défense, July 31st 2015, at <http://www.defense.gouv.fr/operations/irak-syrie/actualites/chammal-point-de-situation-au-31-juillet-2015>

⁶ ‘Canadian, Australian, Dutch and French aircraft linked to possible civilian casualties, CENTCOM file reveals,’ Airwars, September 3rd 2015, at <http://airwars.org/news/internal-coalition-report-shows-45-alleged-civilian-fatality-events-investigated-in-iraq-and-syria/>

later concluded that there was not enough evidence to indicate civilian fatalities, though neither CENTCOM nor the Dutch military has published that report.

There are also transparency issues relating to the use of particular munitions in Iraq. Responding to media requests, Ministry spokespeople have routinely referred to “*weapons released*” while refusing to give a more detailed breakdown of the types of munitions used. Such information is particularly helpful when determining the actual tempo of Dutch strikes - as well as the potential risk to civilians on the ground. As we note elsewhere, such information is routinely published by close allies including the UK and Canada.

As an example, Belgium has now confirmed that while its aircraft released 1,005 weapons in Iraq between October 2014 and July 2015, some 641 of these were in fact 20mm cannon shells – likely to have been released in a small number of events.

We understand that the Netherlands has also used cannon shells in Iraq – which may significantly skew public estimates of Dutch airstrikes (since the general assumption has been that ‘weapons released’ has referred only to bombs and missiles.)

The use of cannon shells in Iraq by the Netherlands was confirmed by the Ministry to Airwars in January 2016. The declassified CENTCOM document obtained in September 2015 also appears to make reference to cannon shells: “*No CIVCAS found due to the Dutch using ball ammo rather than HE [high explosive] round,*” the report notes.⁷ However at present the Ministerie van Defensie refuses to release more detailed figures of which weapons it has released.

Operational security and Daesh propaganda

The Ministerie van Defensie has consistently argued that most information relating to the Dutch air war in Iraq must be publicly withheld on blanket grounds of ‘operational security’. However, recent comments to NOS indicate there are broader issues involved. A spokesperson told the publication that such information is in fact withheld for ‘political and tactical reasons’. “*As you know, IS is a very active propagandist on social media, and they will not pass up the chance to attribute attacks and civilian deaths to the Netherlands. We will not give them that chance.*”⁸

While this argument may appear compelling, it does not appear to be supported by facts on the ground. A key role for Airwars is to track all alleged civilian casualty incidents from

⁷ <http://airwars.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/09/centcom-civcas-investigations.pdf>

⁸ “Het ministerie van Defensie laat weinig los over de aanvallen in Irak. “*Dat is om politieke en tactische redenen*”, zegt een woordvoerder. “*Zoals je weet is IS zeer actief met propaganda op sociale media en zullen ze de kans niet laten liggen om aanvallen en burgerdoden op Nederland af te schuiven. Wij willen ze die kans niet geven.*”” Cited in ‘*Hoeveel bommen gooiden wij al op Irak?*’, NOS, January 29th 2016, at <http://nos.nl/op3/artikel/2083646-hoeveel-bommen-gooiden-wij-al-op-irak.html>

Coalition and other international strikes, in both Iraq and Syria. This includes monitoring a number of outlets which are close to the terrorist organisation Daesh.

In our experience, there are relatively few examples of so-called Islamic State in the Middle East targeting individual Coalition members for propaganda purposes, in relation to particular airstrikes. Claims tend to focus more often on what they term the ‘Crusader aggressors.’

Cases in which Daesh fabricates civilian casualty incidents are also relatively rare. Such false claims are also sometimes challenged by local networks in both Syria and Iraq. Shortly after the recent Paris atrocities for example, assertions appeared on social media that French aircraft had bombed a Mosul primary school. That fabrication was quickly traced back to Daesh by local journalists and activists, and was widely dismissed as false.⁹

Most Daesh propaganda regarding airstrikes is instead created after actual events. Film crews are sent to reported strike locations, to local hospitals and morgues, and to speak with apparent eyewitnesses. Slickly-produced packages are then fed into social media, where they can often have significant reach and impact. Too often, the Coalition allows these powerful propaganda claims by Daesh to go uncontested, effectively ceding much of social media to the enemy.

In the view of Airwars, the Netherlands government has yet to make a compelling case justifying its withholding of data on propaganda grounds. Indeed we would argue the opposite: that there is much to be gained by being open and honest about airstrikes (and errors), while facing down terror propagandists.

Recommendations

The act of waging war rightly places onerous responsibilities upon all combatants. It is surely right not only that nations are held accountable for their military actions – but that they are also *seen* to be held accountable for those actions. At present, an Iraqi or Syrian civilian has no means of knowing whether they have potentially been affected by a Dutch airstrike.

At Airwars, we believe that significantly more information on the Netherlands air war against Daesh can and should routinely be made public, without the incurring of additional operational or national security risks.

We therefore urge the Ministerie van Defensie to adopt Coalition best practice (as already amply demonstrated by close allies Canada and the UK), and to report in a timely fashion both where and when Dutch airstrikes are carried out.

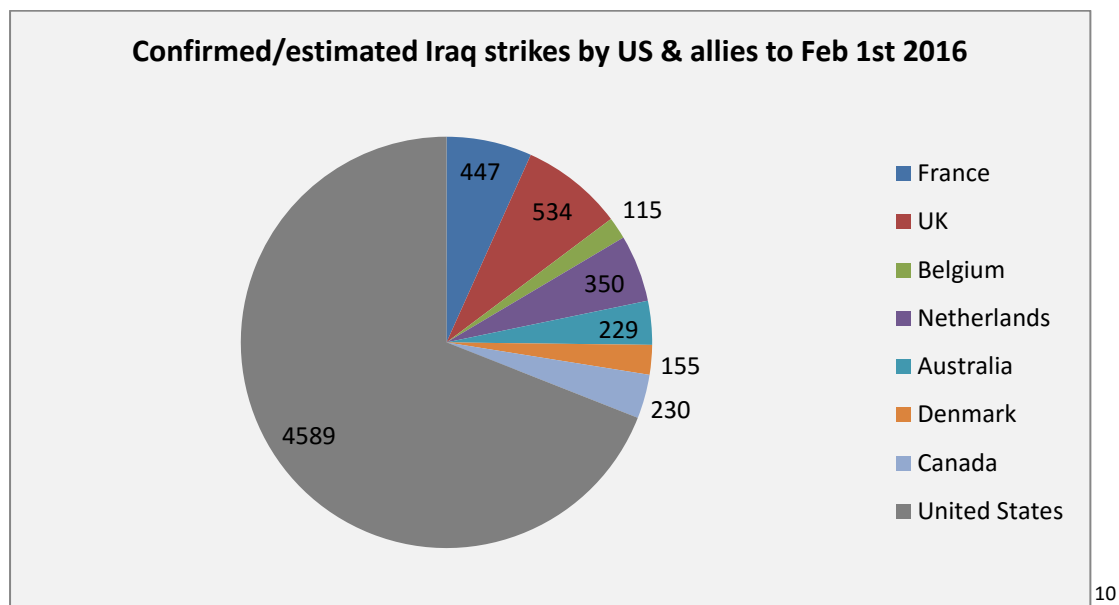
⁹ For more details of this alleged Mosul event, see our incident entry for November 25th 2015, at ‘*Reported civilian and ‘friendly fire’ deaths from Coalition airstrikes 2015*,’ Airwars, at <http://airwars.org/civcas-2015/>

A comparative study of Coalition partners

Among the twelve members of the international Coalition carrying out airstrikes against Daesh in Iraq and Syria, almost all have adopted a more transparent approach to conflict reporting than the Netherlands.

Canada, the United States, the United Kingdom and France all routinely issue detailed information on the dates, locations and general targets of their airstrikes, along with breakdowns of munitions used. Such information is vital when determining which nation of many might have been responsible for any particular alleged event.

Other allies such as Denmark and Belgium – which began from a relatively low transparency base – have subsequently adopted a more open approach to reporting military actions in Iraq, in turn enhancing their public accountability.



The following case studies illustrate how some of the Netherlands' closest allies also present information relating to the war against Daesh. These offer clear examples of how the Netherlands might better be held more publicly accountable for its military actions in the Middle East.

¹⁰ All data supplied by the Coalition and individual Coalition members. Where nations such as the Netherlands present their data as munitions released (rather than as airstrikes), we have used Coalition-wide averages of three weapon releases per airstrike to allow for comparative analysis.

Canada

As our transparency assessment chart indicates, Canada has consistently been the most publicly accountable member of the Coalition, with no apparent impact either on military or homeland security. As a matter of routine, Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) report on the location, target and date of all airstrikes conducted in both Iraq and Syria.¹¹ For example, the following recent entry was posted by CAF on the same day of the strike:

On 3 February 2016, while taking part in coalition operations in support of Iraqi security forces, two CF-18 Hornets successfully struck an ISIL fighting position, an ISIL ammunition cache, and an ISIL vehicle in three separate airstrikes conducted south of Mosul using precision guided munitions.

The Canadians have identified in a timely manner not only the region bombed but also the targets struck. Should there have been an alleged civilian casualty incident that day, such information would have been enough publicly to determine whether Canadian aircraft were – or were not – potentially involved in any alleged incident.

Canada has also proactively engaged, challenging potential propaganda narratives relating to its airstrikes. On January 14th 2016, Daesh-controlled media in Iraq claimed that two Coalition ‘friendly fire’ incidents had led to casualties among Iraqi forces, at Tikrit and Udeim. The only known Coalition partner to have carried out airstrikes in the vicinity of Tikrit that day was Canada, which had targeted ‘an ISIL fighting position.’

Airwars listed the alleged incidents in its public data, while making clear that based on available reports they were most likely a Daesh propaganda exercise. A Canadian Armed Forces spokesman then contacted Airwars with an on the record rebuttal of Daesh claims, which also made clear that Canadian aircraft had struck only at legitimate targets that day.

The Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) has no indications to suggest that friendly forces were harmed or killed as a result of the airstrike by CF-18 Hornets northeast of Tikrit on January 14, 2016. The CAF is aware that ISIL distributes videos and images with the deliberate intent of spreading misinformation in pursuing their objectives. As such, it is important to question the credibility of any such products distributed by ISIL. This airstrike eliminated an ISIL fighting position, reducing the threat posed by ISIL to civilians and members of the Iraqi security forces. The CAF remains committed to supporting Iraqi security forces in order to bolster their efforts to fight ISIL and defend their country.

Airwars has since included the above Canadian statement in its incident report.

¹¹ See ‘*Operation IMPACT – Air Task Force Iraq airstrikes*,’ Canadian Armed Forces, updated as strikes occur, at <http://www.forces.gc.ca/en/operations-abroad-current/op-impact-airstrikes.page>

United Kingdom

Second only to Canada in terms of transparency, the UK publishes regular updates on its air operations in both Iraq and Syria. The dates, locations and targets of British strikes are given along with munitions deployed, as this recent example illustrates:

On Monday 1 February, two Tornados flew reconnaissance and close air support for the Kurdish peshmerga in northern Iraq. Near Kisik Junction, they used a Brimstone missile and three Paveways to attack three rocket launchers and a Daesh vehicle, then over Qayyarah, a further Brimstone and Paveway destroyed an ammunition truck and a mortar position. Typhoons operated in the area of Ramadi, where they conducted successful attacks on three terrorist strongpoints.¹²

The UK MoD routinely issues extensive additional data relating to its military campaign. Recent Freedom of Information requests have seen the Ministry provide data on the number of airstrikes; the numbers and variants of weapons released; and a breakdown of operations by manned and remotely piloted aircraft.¹³ It is worth noting that all such data is instead withheld by the Ministrie van Defensie on grounds of ‘operational security.’

The UK has also been robust in defending itself publicly against what it views as unwarranted casualty claims. In December 2016, analysis by Airwars flagged up eight alleged civilian fatality incidents in Mosul and Ramadi, on days where the UK had also confirmed carrying out airstrikes on those cities.

Following engagement by media and parliamentarians, the MoD conducted a review. This concluded that no British aircraft had participated in any of the alleged events. As Defence Secretary Michael Fallon recently told MPs: “‘RAF aircraft were not involved.’”¹⁴

The British government’s public engagement on the issue of alleged civilian casualties – and its ongoing public commitment to transparency and accountability for UK military actions – has been generally well-received.

¹² ‘Update: Airstrikes Against Daesh’, UK Ministry of Defence, regularly updated, at <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/update-air-strikes-against-daesh>

¹³ See for example ‘FOIA response FOI2016/00034 to Drone Wars UK’, UK Ministry of Defence, February 1st 2016, archived at https://dronewarsuk.files.wordpress.com/2016/02/20160201-foi00034_mr_cole.pdf

¹⁴ Michael Fallon MP, ‘Islamic State: Military Intervention: Written question – 23953’, Hansard, February 2nd 2016, at <http://www.parliament.uk/business/publications/written-questions-answers-statements/written-question/Commons/2016-01-25/23953/>

Belgium

As Committee Members will know the Belgian and Dutch militaries maintain a close working relationship in the war against Daesh, with Belgian F-16s expected to relieve Dutch aircraft and crews in summer 2016. Belgium's own approach to transparency and accountability has been somewhat mixed, although Airwars is encouraged by recent developments.

Belgian aircraft initially conducted combat missions between October 2014 and July 2015. During this time almost no operational details were released. As we noted in an earlier transparency audit, "After reporting an initial airstrike on October 5th 2014, and another on November 3rd, Belgium made no public statements on its ongoing operations until April 24th 2015. Even then it reported only an overall tally of targets and sorties."¹⁵

Following the conclusion of military operations, Belgium has been far more forthcoming. The slide below is from an official Belgian presentation offering significant detail on the campaign, including videos of airstrikes.¹⁶ The Defence Ministry has also now provided data on the number and type of weapons used, with encouraging signs that Belgium may be considering a more transparent approach to reporting airstrikes when the mission resumes in July 2015.

The slide is titled "ODF: FACTS & FIGURES" and covers the period from 01 OCT 2014 to 30 JUN 2015. It is marked as UNCLASSIFIED. The slide features the logos of the European Union and the Belgian Defence Ministry (DEFENSIE LA DÉFENSE). The statistics listed are:

- 618 Pers deployed (+/-120 Pers per Rotation)
- 48 Pilots (75 hours / pilot)
- 3552 Hours flown (Average 4,5 hours per sortie)
- 796 Sorties executed (163 Kinetic Events)
- 3 types of missions:
 - ⇒ Air Interdiction (Deliberate Targeting)
 - ⇒ Close Air Support (Dynamic Targeting)
 - ⇒ Air Reconnaissance

At the bottom of the slide, there is a small image of an F-16 fighter jet in flight. The slide is marked with "UNCLASSIFIED" and the number "5" at the bottom, and the ".be" domain logo is visible in the bottom right corner.

Part of an official Belgian summary of recent air operations in Iraq

¹⁵ 'Cause For Concern: Civilians Killed in Coalition Strikes,' Airwars, August 2015, at <http://airwars.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/08/airwars-cause-for-concern-civilians-killed-by-coalition.pdf>

¹⁶ 'Operation Desert Falcon Sep '14- Jul '15', Belgian Defence Ministry, unclassified briefing, autumn 2015.