

## Written evidence submitted by Dr Larry Lewis

### **Lesson from Mosul and Raqqa: Next Time, do “Everything Possible” to Reduce Civilian Casualties**

Summary: Any effort to assess the effectiveness of UK military operations in support of partner forces retaking Mosul and Raqqa should include consideration of the civilian toll from those operations. The UK Ministry of Defence has repeatedly said that it does “everything possible” to avoid civilian casualties. But more can be done; this paper addresses how the UK government as a whole can have a part in better avoiding, responding to, and acknowledging civilian casualties to learn from the challenges seen in Mosul and Raqqa and keep the promise of doing “everything possible.”

1. My remarks do not necessarily represent the views of the U.S. Government, the State Department, DoD, or CNA, a US research organization that takes academia types and retrains them for operations research and solving military problems. They do speak out of experience with the waging of warfare, and particularly with understanding and reducing the costs of warfare, including civilian casualties. That includes studying how civilian casualties happen and working with militaries on how better to avoid them, in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Syria, and with the Saudi-led coalition regarding operations in Yemen. I also spent two years at the State Department to apply my technical expertise to national security policy.
2. Your inquiry examines the effectiveness of UK military actions in support of the recapture of Mosul in Raqqa from Daish. These cities have been successfully recaptured, in an effort where a multinational coalition worked with partner forces on the ground to regain urban cities held by an irregular and unprincipled force. The fact that the population in these urban areas is no longer living in a reign of terror is in itself a measure of effectiveness. At the same time, international observers going to visit the aftermath of operations are taken aback by the scale of damage: observers have said they hadn’t seen major cities so devastated by combat since World War II.<sup>1</sup> We also hear government estimates of civilian casualties that are both very low in magnitude and quite different from independent estimates such as those provided by AIRWARS.<sup>2</sup> This situation prompts a series of questions: the coalition, including the UK, successfully retook Mosul and Raqqa, but at what cost to the civilians living in these areas? Does the UK understand this cost, and if not, what is needed to accurately characterize it? Finally, are there ways to reduce this cost to civilians in future operations?
3. Many have commented on the how the official Coalition civilian casualty numbers for Iraq and Syria are strikingly low and unrealistic given the nature of the conflict in 2017: primarily an urban fight waged largely with air-to-ground munitions. Past analysis has shown military civilian casualty estimates to be too low in general – just as independent estimates can tend to be

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<sup>1</sup> Patrick Cockburn, US, Britain and France inflicted worst destruction 'in decades' killing civilians in Isis-held city of Raqqa, report says, the Independent, June 5 2018.

<sup>2</sup> Samuel Oakford, They're Still Pulling Bodies Out of ISIS' Capital, the Daily Beast, March 12 2018.

too high. This stems from challenges of detecting civilian casualties with available military capabilities. The current context of the campaign in Iraq and Syria exacerbates this challenge, featuring attacks on buildings and with few or no boots on the ground, instead relying on airborne sensors. This detection problem means that coalition nations such as the UK will not be able to reliably identify when civilian casualties occur based on its own available information, and when it does, there is no guarantee that the accounting is complete. For example, the military may have full motion video showing several civilians killed but not be aware of dozens more buried in the rubble.

4. This detection problem was a challenge across the coalition, but the UK appears to be particularly affected. As the UK's Operation Shader was the second-largest contributor to the air campaign in Iraq and Syria, with over 1700 strikes, the official UK reporting of one civilian casualty from those strikes strains credulity.<sup>3</sup> At the very least, this means that the civilian casualty rate for UK strikes is dramatically lower than that for the coalition as a whole, and is also significantly lower than the lowest rate observed previously in Afghanistan under ISAF. Given that many of these airstrikes were in an urban setting with increased collateral risks, historically speaking it is more likely than not that this low number is at least in part from poor detection of civilian casualties when they occur.

5. There are two ways to remedy this situation. Militaries like the UK can bolster their own capabilities to detect civilian casualties post-strike. This can include using drones like Reaper and Predator for post-strike monitoring, since they were able to detect civilian casualties when fighter aircraft could not. They can also work more closely with independent groups to better consider external information to complement its assessments; this includes not dismissing out of hand external allegations simply because they cannot be verified by military information sources. Both of these steps would help the detection problem: having a more full set of information puts militaries in a better place to evaluate what the effects of their operations are.<sup>4</sup>

6. Low reported civilian casualty numbers are not just a matter of getting the numbers right. They are also a symptom of a bigger problem: a systemic difficulty anticipating the likelihood and magnitude of civilian casualties when planning and conducting attacks. This problem in anticipating civilian casualties is seen in cases where the coalition was surprised by external reports – such as the incident in Mosul in March 2017 where the U.S. later investigated and found it had killed 105 civilians in an airstrike.<sup>5</sup> At the time of the strike, it was unaware of the presence of civilians.

7. The March 2017 incident in Mosul also illustrates another point: that the coalition operated with partner forces in both Mosul and Raqqa, and the nature of those partners increased the risk

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<sup>3</sup> Jamie Merrill, UK Parliament launches inquiry into RAF strikes on Mosul and Raqqa, Middle East Eye, May 11 2018.

<sup>4</sup> The risks of partnering is also explored in the APPG on Drones' forthcoming report The UK's Use of Armed Drones: Working with Partners.

<sup>5</sup> Martin Chulov, US admits Mosul airstrikes killed over 100 civilians during battle with Isis, the Guardian, May 25 2017.

of civilian casualties during coalition operations. That includes limitations in proficiency, lesser capabilities, and different tolerances for risk. From Iraq to Afghanistan to non-state groups in Syria to providing arms for partners operating in Yemen, it is clear that more attention is needed on civilian protection considerations for partner forces. Giving forces a weapon and a law of armed conflict brief is not sufficient for managing outcomes. We can be more deliberate about how we work with partner forces. This includes work in planning and shaping operations, training and equipping partner forces, and how we work with them in tactical execution, such as building in additional safeguards to ensure that we strike intended targets and that collateral effects are sufficiently considered.<sup>6</sup> We can also work with partner forces to help address a challenge exacerbated in urban settings: explosive weapons with reverberating effects that impact essential services such as water and power. While the UK and other members of the coalition considered civilian casualties prior to strikes, those second-order effects were not considered in the same way, negatively impacting the welfare of the population. Using the knowledge of partners to avoid damaging infrastructure is a way to leverage the collective strengths of both militaries like the UK and its partners.

8. Another lesson seen in Mosul and Raqqa – a lesson indicated but not learned – is the need to monitor civilian casualty trends and make operational adjustments in stride. This was a practice done in Afghanistan, where both the ISAF civilian casualty tracking cell and US lessons learned elements monitored trends, and efforts were made to address areas of concern. For example, after the completion of the Joint Civilian Casualty Study in August 2010, I continued to receive updated civilian casualty data from ISAF and used that data to determine trends and potential areas of concern.<sup>7</sup> In early 2011, several types of operations showed increased risk of civilian casualties. After this finding was forwarded to ISAF, international forces made operational adjustments in those areas of operations to address those concerns. As a result, the civilian casualty trends were quickly reversed. In contrast, the rate of civilian casualties in Raqqa and especially in Mosul rose over time and yet there were no monitoring efforts with accompanying operational adjustments to address them. This monitoring and learning function was codified in policy by the US in its 2016 Executive Order 13732 on civilian casualties, but has not yet been implemented in practice.<sup>8</sup>

9. This example highlights a critical gap for the UK regarding civilian casualties: the lack of a national policy. The US goes to great lengths to avoid non-combatant casualties in its operations. Over time, it recognized that compliance with international law and military doctrine was insufficient for doing everything possible to reduce civilian casualties in its operations. The Executive Order creates a national policy to reflect its practices, which the U.S. regards as more protective than the requirements of the law of armed conflict. While not all elements have been fully implemented to date (e.g., as mentioned above, Section 4 on civilian casualty monitoring

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<sup>6</sup> Such a national policy could also help address some policy concerns discussed in the APPG on Drones' forthcoming report *The UK's Use of Armed Drones: Working with Partners*.

<sup>7</sup> Sarah Sewall and Larry Lewis, *Joint Civilian Casualty Study*, August 31 2010.

<sup>8</sup> The White House, *United States Policy on Pre- and Post-Strike Measures to Address Civilian Casualties in U.S. Operations Involving the Use of Force*, Executive Order 13732, July 1 2016.

has not been implemented), the national policy helps to focus national institutions to best meet policy commitments for protecting civilians in war, and facilitates interagency cooperation to that end. The US policy reflects measures for reducing civilian casualties, how to respond to them when they occur, how to track, monitor, and learn from them, and the imperative to work with partner forces. The UN, in its recent Secretary General annual report on the protection of civilians, urged all nations to develop a national policy.<sup>9</sup> The UK would benefit from such a national policy to help address the concerns discussed here.<sup>10</sup>

10. Working hard to protect civilians in armed conflict is consistent with UK values and principles. That is reason enough to strive to learn lessons from Mosul and Raqqa and do better. But there is another reason to do this – it is smart strategy. We have seen how groups like Al Qaeda and ISIS use civilian casualties as a recruiting tool and rallying cry. We also see how civilian casualties in conflict can harm the conduct of a campaign, by degrading the support of the host nation population, reducing freedom of action from limitations imposed by the host nation government, and causing friction among coalition partners. The UK MoD has repeatedly said that it does “everything possible” to avoid civilian casualties.<sup>11</sup> But more can be done; this paper addresses how the UK government as a whole can have a part in better avoiding, responding to, and acknowledging civilian casualties to keep the promise of doing “everything possible.”

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<sup>9</sup> Report of the Secretary General, Protection of civilians in armed conflict, United Nations, S/2018/462, May 14 2018.

<sup>10</sup> Such a national policy could help address some policy concerns discussed in the APPG’s report *The UK’s Use of Armed Drones: Working with Partners*.

<sup>11</sup> Josie Ensor, US-led coalition responsible for civilian death toll 'not seen since Vietnam' in fight against Isis, the Telegraph, May 22 2018.