



# Improving Belgian transparency and public accountability in the war against Daesh

## 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 additionally track and assess all known allegations of civilian deaths from Russian and Coalition airstrikes – and publish our findings in an accessible, open-source database.

We also maintain fair contacts with many militaries participating in the anti-Daesh war. And we engage with governments – both publicly and privately – on civilian casualty concerns.

Airwars has swiftly become a trusted resource, with our data widely cited. We have to date assisted journalists and researchers in many nations including Belgium, the Netherlands, the UK, Canada, Australia, the United States and Denmark.

All of our staff and volunteers are professional journalists and researchers with specialist knowledge of conflicts; of the Middle East; and/or of casualty recording. Our funding is primarily via the Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust, the Open Society Foundation, and the Network for Social Change.

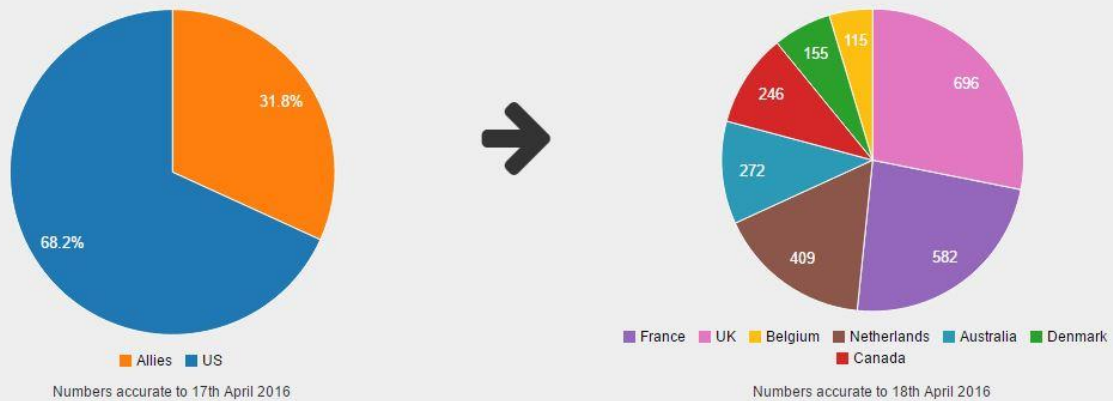
## Belgium's ongoing anti-Daesh campaign: context

Belgium began its air campaign against so-called Islamic State in Iraq on October 5<sup>th</sup> 2014 – targeting Daesh alongside other international Coalition partners. In nine months, six Belgian F-16s carried out approximately 113 airstrikes, a significant contribution to the war effort (*see Graphic 1.*)

On July 2<sup>nd</sup> 2015, Belgium became the first nation officially to suspend its campaign following an agreement with the Netherlands. The two countries agreed to rotate their forces, with Belgian airstrikes now expected to resume in July 2016.

## Estimated number of airstrikes in Iraq

The chart on the left shows US and allied strikes in Iraq, while the right-hand chart gives a breakdown of allied-only strikes. All data is drawn from official military reports of CJTF-OIR, France, UK, Belgium, Denmark, Netherlands, Australia and Canada. Where countries only issue data on weapons released, we estimate the number of strikes based on the overall average of weapons released per strike.



**Graphic 1: Airstrikes in Iraq by Coalition partner**

The upcoming parliamentary debate on possibly extending Belgian airstrikes to Syria represents an important opportunity to reassess:

- How the Defence Ministry has reported anti-Daesh actions so far.
- To compare such reporting with that of close allies.
- And for MPs and wider society to consider how transparency and public accountability for Belgian military actions might be improved moving forward.

This briefing paper seeks to address these issues, recommending that Belgium adopts a far more transparent approach to airstrike reporting in the second phase of its air campaign.

### Airstrike reporting between October 2014 and July 2015: a poor record

As *Graphic 2* demonstrates, Belgium's Operation Desert Falcon has so far been among the least transparent campaigns among the 12-member international Coalition fighting so-called Islamic State. Only Bahrain (which we believe conducted just one airstrike on the opening night of the air war in Syria) has a worse record in terms of public accountability for its military actions.

After reporting an initial airstrike somewhere in Iraq on October 5th 2014<sup>1</sup>, and another on November 3<sup>rd</sup> of that year, Belgium made no known public statements on its ongoing

<sup>1</sup> 'Op zondag 5 oktober, nota bene tijdens het bezoek van de generaals Van Caelenberge en Van de Voorde, werden de Belgische F-16's een eerste keer opgeroepen voor een aanval op vijandelijke strijders die Iraakse veiligheidstroepen viseerden. Ze voerden de aanval succesvol uit met een precisewapen, nadat ze eerst elk

operations until April 24th 2015. Even then it, reported only an overall tally of targets and sorties.

Questioned at the time about this lack of transparency, a Defence Ministry spokesperson told Airwars in summer 2015 that “*the locations, timings and the effects of any mission (not just those of Operation Desert Falcon) are classified and cannot be revealed.*”

**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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**Graphic 2: Transparency by Coalition partner**

In addition, the Ministry of Defence insisted that no “*collateral damage*” incidents had occurred involving Belgian aircraft, and that its actions had been “*fully compatible with our obligations under international humanitarian law.*”<sup>2</sup>

This latter claim was partially borne out in a declassified CENTCOM document obtained by Airwars in September 2015, which listed alleged casualty events involving Coalition

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*risico op schade aan onschuldige burgers of installaties volledig hadden uitgesloten.’*  
<https://www.mil.be/nl/artikel/f-16s-irak-actie-tijdens-bezoek-defensiechef>

<sup>2</sup> Cited in *Cause For Concern: Civilians Killed in Coalition Strikes*, Airwars report, August 2015, at <https://airwars.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/08/airwars-cause-for-concern-civilians-killed-by-coalition.pdf>

partners. While Canadian, French, Dutch and Australian aircraft were all implicated in possible events, there was no reference to Belgian aircraft among 45 investigated incidents.<sup>3</sup>

However, because Belgium has not published the locations of any of its airstrikes to date in Iraq, it remains impossible to assess airstrikes against the public record. Between October 5<sup>th</sup> 2014 and July 2<sup>nd</sup> 2015 Airwars has identified a total of 71 claimed civilian casualty events in Iraq only, in which Coalition aircraft are alleged to have killed 624 to 892 civilian non-combatants.

Of these 71 events, the US has confirmed causing between 9 and 11 civilian deaths in three cases. Airwars presently assesses a further 20 Iraqi incidents as having likely caused 197 to 315 civilian deaths. Yet because the Defence Ministry gave no locations, it remains impossible to track Belgian airstrikes against any of those 20 events – and thus to determine potential responsibility.<sup>4</sup>

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 above 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.

Other nations in the Coalition have adopted a far more transparent approach than Belgium with no known negative repercussions. The UK, the United States, Canada and France all regularly report on 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 – and crucially, can be *seen* to be held accountable..

## Belgian transparency in recent months: an improved record

Following the initial conclusion of military operations in July 2015, Belgium has been more forthcoming on details of its air war against so-called Islamic State. The slide below (**Graphic 3**) is from an official Belgian Defence Ministry presentation offering reasonable detail on the campaign, including videos of airstrikes.<sup>5</sup>

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

<sup>4</sup> All data from Airwars monitoring. For our full reports on all alleged Coalition and Russian civilian casualty events please see <https://airwars.org/civilian-casualty-claims/>

<sup>5</sup> 'Operation Desert Falcon Sep '14- Jul '15', Belgian Defence Ministry, unclassified press briefing, Autumn 2015.

Information has also been provided on the overall number of sorties; and on procedures used to minimise risk to non-combatants.

The Defence Ministry has additionally provided data on the number and type of weapons used, informing Airwars that while its aircraft released 1,005 weapons in Iraq between October 2014 and July 2015, some 641 of these munitions were in fact 20mm cannon shells – likely to have been released in a small number of events.

The information provided by the Defence Ministry to Airwars and others suggests Belgium may be considering a more transparent approach to reporting airstrikes when the mission resumes in July 2016. As we argue below, this can be achieved without compromising operational or national security.

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## ODF: AIR INTERDICTION

- Air Interdiction: destruction of staging area, command centers, strategic infrastructure, etc
  - Using high precision weapons with targeting pod
  - Zero collateral damage, no civilian casualties

Pre-strike





Post-strike



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**Graphic 3: Part of an official Belgian media presentation on 2014-2015 Iraq air operations**

## Operational and national security, and Daesh propaganda

One argument for withholding information on Belgian airstrikes is that this may allow for propaganda opportunities by the enemy: so-called Islamic State, and other extremists. The recent terrorist atrocities in Belgium make clear that this is an important concern, which should not be dismissed lightly.

However on the ground in Iraq or Syria, there is little evidence that Daesh seeks to target Belgium (or indeed other Coalition members) via propaganda claims. Airwars tracks all claimed civilian casualty incidents from both alleged Coalition and Russian strikes, a database which presently includes more than 1,000 events. 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 broadly 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 Paris atrocities in 2015 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.<sup>6</sup>

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 Belgian 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 the location of airstrikes (and errors when they unfortunately occur), while facing down terror propagandists.

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<sup>6</sup> For more details of this alleged Mosul event, see our incident entry for November 25<sup>th</sup> 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

In considering whether Belgium should improve airstrike transparency and accountability, Airwars believes there is much to be gained by examining the record of close allies.

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 Belgium.

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

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

### Canada

As our transparency assessment chart on Page 3 indicates, Canada was consistently the most publicly accountable member of the Coalition until kinetic operations ended in February 2016 - with no apparent impact either on military or homeland security. As a matter of routine, Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) reported on the location, target and date of all airstrikes conducted in both Iraq and Syria.<sup>7</sup> For example, the following 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 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.

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<sup>7</sup> 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>

Canada has also proactively engaged, challenging potential propaganda narratives relating to its airstrikes. On January 14<sup>th</sup> 2016, Daesh-controlled media in Iraq claimed that two Coalition ‘friendly fire’ incidents 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.

## 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:

Two RAF Reapers operating over Syria conducted strikes on Friday 22 April. Near Abu Kamal, one Reaper provided surveillance support to a successful coalition attack on an improvised weapons factory, then used two of its own Hellfire missiles to demolish a nearby workshop used for constructing car-bombs. The second Reaper tracked a terrorist vehicle near Tabuqah, south-west of Raqqa, and destroyed it with a Hellfire.

In western Iraq, Typhoons continued to support Iraqi ground forces north of Fallujah, where they conducted four Paveway attacks against snipers, a bunker and an entrenched fighting position. Tornados patrolled south-west of Kirkuk, where two Paveways destroyed a bridge built by Daesh across a canal, and a communications post nearby.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> ‘Update: Airstrikes Against Daesh’, UK Ministry of Defence, regularly updated, at <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/update-air-strikes-against-daesh>



This locational and targeting data provided by the UK enables Airwars to check British reports against the public record. For April 22<sup>nd</sup> 2016, our database indicates just one alleged Coalition civilian casualty event, at Mosul. The UK's public summary makes clear that its aircraft were not implicated – a valuable check against possible propaganda claims.

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 told MPs: ““RAF aircraft were not involved.”<sup>9</sup>

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. As the case studies of both Canada and the UK illustrate, it is possible for Coalition members to be reasonably open about their military actions – and thus publicly accountable – without risking national or operational security.

## 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 Belgian airstrike.

At Airwars, we believe that significantly more information on the 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 Defence Ministry and Government of Belgium 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 its airstrikes are carried out.

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<sup>9</sup> Michael Fallon MP, 'Islamic State: Military Intervention: Written question – 23953,' Hansard, February 2<sup>nd</sup> 2016, at <http://www.parliament.uk/business/publications/written-questions-answers-statements/written-question/Commons/2016-01-25/23953/>