Written by **Michael Tennant** on November 15, 2021

U.S. Covered Up Airstrike in Syria That Killed Scores of Civilians

The U.S. military covered up a 2019 airstrike against an Islamic State camp in Syria that potentially killed dozens of women and children while taking out just a handful of fighters, according to an extensive report published Saturday by the *New York Times*.


F-15E Strike Eagle

On March 18, 2019, F-15E attack planes dropped one 500-pound bomb and two one-ton bombs on an Islamic State camp at Baghuz, Syria, hours after fighters had been beaten back from a "predawn counteroffensive," reported the *Times*.

The attack had been called in by Task Force 9, a classified special-operations unit, based on its assessment of the situation from a drone with a standard-definition camera. The task force would later claim it saw 16 armed men among a group of people on a steep riverbank, which supposedly justified the massive destruction.

However, a drone with a high-definition camera was also flying over the camp, presenting a significantly different picture to Air Force personnel in Qatar. They saw "two or three men — not 16 — wander through the frame near the crowd" with no apparent intent to engage in hostilities, wrote the *Times*. They were stunned when they saw the explosions:

> "Who dropped that?" a confused analyst typed on a secure chat system being used by those monitoring the drone, two people who reviewed the chat log recalled. Another responded, "We just dropped on 50 women and children."

"Civilian observers who came to the area of the strike the next day found piles of dead women and children," noted the *Times*. But "satellite images from four days later show the sheltered bank and area around it, which were in the control of the coalition, appeared to have been bulldozed," suggesting a coverup.

Task Force 9 got away with such things because it "was systematically circumventing the safeguards created to limit civilian deaths," penned the newspaper. The task force would assert the vast majority of its airstrikes were in self-defense — never mind the fact that its personnel "were usually well behind the front lines" — allowing it to skip the normal procedures and bomb away. When counting the dead, "personnel … did not investigate on the ground and often based their findings on how many dead civilians they could definitively identify from aerial footage of the rubble." (In this case, they said 16 fighters and four civilians were killed.) Later, when completing logs on its strikes, the task force

allegedly added details to justify its claims of self-defense. And when the strike process was assessed, it was performed "by the units that called in the strikes, meaning the task force was grading its own performance."

Not everyone was satisfied to let the task force do its own thing.

Lieutenant Colonel Dean Korsak, an Air Force attorney, ordered the units involved in the Baghuz bombing to preserve certain pieces of evidence and reported the incident to his chain of command and the Office of Special Investigations. According to the *Times*, "A major responded that agents probably would not look into it, saying the office typically investigated civilian casualty reports only when there was 'potential for high media attention, concern with outcry from local community/government, concern sensitive images may get out.'"

Getting nowhere, Korsak filed a hotline complaint with the Pentagon's inspector general's office in August 2019. A team including now-former evaluator Gene Tate — who claims he was fired in October 2020 for criticizing the office's leadership — thought Korsak had "extremely credible" evidence of a war crime.

Meanwhile, a group of Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) officers working in Syria also called the hotline to report their concerns about Task Force 9, which should really have gotten some action on the matter. You have to be pretty bad for the CIA to complain that you're overstepping the bounds of propriety.

In the end, though, U.S. Central Command stonewalled the investigation. It even removed a reference to a potential legal violation that was included in the task force's original report on the Baghuz strike. A classified report on civilian casualties in general failed to mention the incident. In fact, Central Command did not even acknowledge it had taken place until last week, when the *Times* presented it with incontrovertible evidence. According to the paper, Central Command claimed "80 people were killed but the airstrikes were justified," and it refused to classify as civilians the 60 people it did not deem either fighters or civilians because their status was supposedly unclear.

Undaunted by his termination, Tate sent the Senate Armed Services Committee a 10-page letter on the incident in May. The committee, in turn, contacted Korsak, who also provided them with a detailed account of the matter. Since then, Tate has heard nothing further from the committee.