

# FALLING SHORT

An analysis of the reporting of  
UK drone strikes by the MOD

Max Brookman-Byrne

**Drone Wars UK**

Note: The term 'drone' is used interchangeably with 'Unmanned Aerial Vehicle (UAV)'

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Drone Wars UK is a small British NGO established in 2010 to undertake research and advocacy around the use of armed drones. We believe that the growing use of remotely-controlled, armed unmanned systems is encouraging and enabling a lowering of the threshold for the use of lethal force as well as eroding well established human rights norms. While some argue that the technology itself is neutral, we believe that drones are a danger to global peace and security. We have seen over the past decade that once these systems are in the armoury, the temptation to use them becomes great, even beyond the constraints of international law. As more countries develop or acquire this technology, the danger to global peace and security grows.

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Introduction	5
1 Executive Summary	7
2 Methodology	9
3 Analysis and findings	11
The MOD Reports and International Humanitarian Law	11
The relevant international law	11
The reports and international law	12
Terms used to denote targets	14
Terms used to describe strikes	17
The meaning of an 'air strike'	17
The narrative representation of the act of striking	18
The presence of civilians within the MOD reports	20
Miscellaneous additional findings	21
4 Conclusion	23
Appendix	25
Table 1: Target terms used and their frequency (drone strikes)	25
Table 2: Target terms used and their frequency (conventional air strikes)	26
Table 3: UK air weapons fired in Iraq and Syria in 2017, comparing metrics	26
Table 4: Strike terms used and their frequency (drone strikes)	27
Table 5: Strike terms used and their frequency (conventional air strikes)	27





# Introduction

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Since August 2014, the United Kingdom has been carrying out air strikes in Iraq and Syria. Under the auspices of 'Operation Shader' these air strikes represent the larger part of UK's role in the US-led coalition combating ISIS in the region. Justified under international law as part of the collective self-defence of Iraq, as of April 2018 these operations are ongoing, despite official statements by the Governments of Iraq and Syria that ISIS has been defeated.<sup>1</sup> In March 2018, UK Defence Secretary Gavin Williamson confirmed that air strikes will continue in Iraq and Syria until the 'absolute defeat' of ISIS.<sup>2</sup> It can be anticipated therefore that Operation Shader will continue for the foreseeable future.

A large portion of the air strikes carried out by the RAF during Operation Shader have been by armed drones (also called 'unmanned aerial vehicles' (UAVs) or 'Remotely Piloted Air Systems (RPAS)) and it is with these that the present report is primarily concerned. As of 31 December 2017, out of 5,474 total missions flown by UK armed aircraft as part of Operation Shader, 2,423 were by Reaper, the armed drone used by the RAF, accounting for 44% of missions. During these drone missions, 788 weapons have been launched out of a total for all missions of 3,599, representing just under 22%. Drone activity therefore represents a significant contribution to the overall military operations carried out by the RAF in Iraq and Syria.

Despite the impression of drone operations as being inherently clandestine (an impression arguably created by the highly secretive air strikes carried out by the US against Al-Qaeda) the UK MOD has made some attempts to be transparent about Operation Shader generally, as well as its use of drones. Since the beginning of Operation Shader, the MOD has published on its website reports into the air strikes that have been carried out by the RAF.<sup>3</sup> Assuming that the reports represent the majority of air strikes that have

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1 Andrew England 'Iraq announces defeat of ISIS' (9 December 2017) *Financial Times* <https://www.ft.com/content/d6636416-dcf3-11e7-a8a4-0a1e63a52f9c>; Angus McDowall and Sarah Dadouch, 'Syria declares victory over Islamic State' (9 November 2017) *Reuters* <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-islamic-state/syria-declares-victory-over-islamic-state-idUSKBN1D91QJ>.

2 'Defence Secretary reaffirms commitment to Daesh's total defeat in meeting with Iraqi counterpart' (6 March 2018) *Ministry of Defence* <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/defence-secretary-reaffirms-commitment-to-daeshs-total-defeat-in-meeting-with-iraqi-counterpart>.

3 'British Forces Air Strikes in Iraq and Syria: Monthly List' *Ministry of Defence* <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/british-forces-air-strikes-in-iraq-monthly-list>. The reports are published intermittently and then edited down into a monthly list.

occurred under the remit of Operation Shader,<sup>4</sup> the steps taken by the MOD towards greater transparency are to be welcomed, in principle enabling the assessment of individual strikes by third parties.

The process of how these updates are written has been gleaned through a Freedom of Information (FOI) request made to the MOD. After each mission, the pilot writes a flight report with additional detailed accounts when weapons have been fired. These are classified for reasons of operational security but also contain a large amount of military jargon, so they are reviewed and a new narrative version of each attack is written separately.<sup>5</sup>

The present work is an examination of these published reports building on and greatly expanding an aspect of earlier evidence provided by the author to the All Party Parliamentary Group on Drones.<sup>6</sup> The work represents the culmination of an analysis of all reports of drone strikes under Operation Shader, identifying themes, patterns and problems. After an executive summary, this report provides an overview of the methodology employed and then discusses the analysis undertaken in relation to various aspects of the MOD's Operations Shader reports, presenting conclusions throughout. The research behind this report and its drafting was carried out on behalf of, and was funded by, Drone Wars UK.

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4 It appears that the reports may not describe every single strike. As at least one is missing - the strike that targeted Reyaad Khan and Ruhul Amin does not appear in the MOD reports. There are also differences between the number of strikes recorded in these reports and statistical information released about the number of strikes. For further analysis of this disconnect between statistical and narrative reporting, see section 4.c.i.

5 Based on MOD FOI response, 7 June 2018.

6 M. Brookman-Byrne 'Some legal considerations raised by the UK's use of armed drones' evidence given to the APPG on Drones, December 2017 [http://appgdrones.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2014/08/9.-MBB-Some-legal-considerations-Dec\\_2015\\_final.pdf](http://appgdrones.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2014/08/9.-MBB-Some-legal-considerations-Dec_2015_final.pdf).

# 1

## Executive summary

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*The fact that some air strikes are described in detail, particularly those that seem the most palatable, makes the absence of detail in others difficult to understand. It is not suggested that the MOD include detail on the legal analysis that surrounds each air strike, but it ought at least to include enough of the factual information around a strike to enable a prima facie conclusion that a strike probably adhered to international humanitarian law in terms of targeting. This is particularly so given that it only takes a small number of words to enable such a conclusion.*

The analysis of the Operation Shader reports points to some interesting conclusions in regard to the way in which drone strikes have been presented by the MOD. It also highlights some problems with the way that the reports have been worded and provides suggestions for possible ways in which the MOD could alter its approach to these reports to improve transparency.

Consideration is made of relevant aspects of international law and the reporting of drone strikes, asking if the reports provide enough information for a broad determination as to whether a given strike seemed to accord with or violate relevant law. The analysis established that nearly half of the reports do not provide sufficient information to make such a determination.

There is a brief comparison of the narrative reporting of air strikes and related statistical reports, revealing a questionable mismatch between the two. Relatedly, the term 'air strike' is shown to be unhelpful as a metric to communicate the quantity and intensity of aerial bombing as it can mean a single weapon launched at a single target, or multiple weapons launched at multiple targets within the same geographical area or timeframe.

In relation to the terms used to describe the act of a strike itself, there is an emphasis within the reports away from euphemism, with terms like 'destroy', 'attack' and 'strike' making up the majority of descriptors used during drone operations. This is similar to that of reports of conventional air strikes. However, there are occasions when the language used is arguably inappropriate for the gravity of a situation in which people are being killed; for instance, 'scored a direct hit' appears in many of the reports, though this is not unique to those of drone strikes. Similarly inappropriate is the metaphor of 'hunting', which appears in some of the reports of drone strikes but is absent from those of

conventional strikes. This can perhaps be seen to demonstrate something of the mind-set that accompanies drone combat.

In relation to terms used to describe targets, 61% of drone reports during Operation Shader contain the terms 'terrorist' or 'extremist' which have no basis in international law and are inappropriate and unhelpful in terms of transparency. The terms also appear in the reports of conventional air strikes, though the figure drops to 42%. Further, 'terrorist' or 'extremist' account for 23% of all targets identified within the reports of drone strikes during Operation Shader, while for conventional aircraft it is just 8%. This suggests a greater tendency to use untransparent descriptors within reports of drone strikes. Based on the analysis undertaken to produce this work, the tendency appears to have increased significantly over time.

Just 4% of reports of drone strikes within Operation Shader refer to the presence of civilians and the fact that they were not harmed by the air strike being reported. This is very concerning as it makes it impossible to know the reality of the impact that drone strikes have on civilians. This is not a problem that is unique to drones as under 2% of reports of conventional air strikes under Operation Shader refer to civilians.

In terms of more general findings, both the reports of drone and of conventional air strikes carried out as part of Operation Shader have a low, but nevertheless present, tendency to praise the capabilities of the system, weapons and crew of aircraft.

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- ➔ Nearly half of the reports do not provide sufficient information to make a basic determination as to whether the strike accords with relevant law.

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  - ➔ The presence of civilians has been airbrushed from the reports. It is suggested that each report should include a short statement about whether civilians were, were possibly or were not present in the vicinity of a strike.

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  - ➔ Inappropriate metaphors such as 'hunting' and the shorthand description of individuals as 'terrorists' or 'extremists' instead of providing an explanation as to why those individuals were targeted should be avoided.

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# 2 Methodology

The research underpinning this work focused on the analysis of three groups of reports, all detailing air strikes carried out by the RAF. The term 'report' is used to refer to the narrative account provided by the MOD detailing the operations carried out by aircraft; these are generally as they appear when released by the MOD website. In some instances however, larger texts have been taken apart and considered as multiple separate 'reports' of different operations on different dates, where appropriate.

The first dataset ('UK drone operations in Iraq and Syria') comprises those reports of air strikes carried out using drones, or in which drones played a key role, and which targeted individuals and objects as part of Operation Shader, between September 2014 and December 2017. There are 361 of these reports, all of which are taken from the original updates on UK military action in Iraq and Syria issued by the MOD on an irregular basis (between twice a week and once a month depending on the level of activity) since September 2014 and captured by Drone Wars UK. Edited versions of these reports have been compiled by the MoD into monthly summaries and are available on the MOD website.<sup>7</sup>

The second dataset comprises those reports which detail air strikes carried out by conventional aircraft (RAF Typhoon and Tornado) against individuals and objects as part of Operation Shader, between September 2014 and December 2017. As with the drone reports, these have all come from the originally published reports.<sup>8</sup> This full set has in turn been divided into two sets: one ('UK conventional operations in Iraq and Syria, full set') maintains the full dataset and has been used for automated analysis, for instance identifying all reports which contain specific words. This set contains 947 reports. The other ('UK conventional operations in Iraq and Syria, partial set') consists of a random sample of 316 reports taken from the original 947 and has been used for manual coding and discourse analysis.

The third and final dataset ('UK drone operations in Afghanistan') comprises reports detailing air strikes carried out by drones in Afghanistan, between January 2010 and August 2012. The reports were gathered from periodic

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<sup>7</sup> 'British Forces Air Strikes in Iraq and Syria: Monthly List' *Ministry of Defence* <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/british-forces-air-strikes-in-iraq-monthly-list>.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

statements made by the MOD though they do not represent the entire programme of drone strikes carried out during that campaign. Unfortunately, the website containing the reports has been taken down, therefore analysis has been made of the 91 reports held on file by Drone Wars UK.<sup>9</sup>

These collections of reports were each analysed in multiple ways. The full sets were subject to some automated analysis, using functions within Microsoft Excel, such as establishing the word counts of each report, along with associated statistics. It also included the use of Excel functions to establish the prevalence of certain terms within the reports, such as the extent to which terms like 'terrorist' are used within individual reports.

More detailed discourse analysis was undertaken in relation to three of the datasets: 'UK drone operations in Iraq and Syria', 'UK conventional operations in Iraq and Syria, partial set' and 'UK drone operations in Afghanistan'.<sup>10</sup> In several sifts of the data, each report was coded on the basis of the terms used to indicate the individual or object targeted, as well as the term used to describe the actual act of the air strike. The report below, from the 'UK drone operations in Iraq and Syria' set, is given as an example:

*'a Reaper conducted three successful strikes with two Hellfire missiles and a GBU-12 guided bomb against ISIL terrorist positions in western Iraq, including an anti-aircraft gun which the Reaper had located.'*

This report was coded in the following way: the air strike word is 'strike', the target words are 'terrorist position' and 'anti-aircraft gun'. Subsequently, terms which differed slightly were homogenised to provide a clearer picture of the extent to which those terms have been used within the reports. For instance, the terms 'accommodation', 'accommodation block' and 'Daesh accommodation blocks' (all terms that appear in the 'UK conventional operations in Iraq and Syria, partial set') were all rendered as 'accommodation' in the final coding of the data.

On this basis it was possible to identify commonly used keywords to describe the targets of air strikes, as well as the terms used to describe air strikes themselves. It was therefore possible to compare the reports of drone strikes under Operation Shader with those of conventional air strikes in the same campaign and drone strikes in Afghanistan. Likewise, it was possible to identify trends over time.

In addition, other features of the reports were able to be identified through this discourse analysis, through the identification of rhetoric and other devices that stood out as significant.

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9 'UK Drone Strike List' *Drone Wars* <https://dronewarsuk.files.wordpress.com/2012/02/uk-drone-strike-list-at-29-02-12-pdf.pdf>.

10 This level of detailed analysis was undertaken of the 'UK conventional operations in Iraq and Syria, partial set' rather than the full set due to the time and resources available.

# Analysis and findings

The examination of the text of the MOD reports produced a number of interesting conclusions. Areas of analysis considered are: the overall level of detail present within the reports and how this relates to international law; the terms used to describe individual people targeted by air strikes; the use of terms to describe the act of a strike itself, that is the moment at which a missile impacts on its target; the problems associated with the term 'air strike'; the presence of civilians within the reports; and other miscellaneous themes. These have been chosen as areas of interest as they provide a good analytical framework for considering the facets of each report and they are in part informed by the aspects of international law that impact upon the lawfulness of this kind of military operation.

## The MOD Reports and International Humanitarian Law

A key part of the analysis into the MOD Reports was their examination through the lens of international humanitarian law (IHL). This was not done in order to make a definitive determination as to whether or not particular strikes were lawful according to this branch of international law, but to ask in a more general sense whether sufficient information had been given within the reports to make something of a broad determination possible.

### The relevant international law

Before embarking on a discussion of the MOD Reports and IHL, a quick outline of relevant IHL will be given. IHL (also called the law of armed conflict) is that branch of international law that governs the use of military force during an armed conflict. It is set out in international treaties, such as the Geneva Conventions and their Additional Protocols, as well as customary international law (an aspect of international law that develops through the practice of states). Put simply, during an armed conflict—such as the one in which the UK is engaged with ISIS—people who are not members of a state's armed forces are recognised as civilian by IHL, meaning that

they are protected<sup>11</sup> and may not be made the object of attack.<sup>12</sup> However, civilians will lose this protection if, and for as long as, they take a direct part in hostilities.<sup>13</sup> This has the result that members of non-state armed groups, such as ISIS, remain classified as civilians due to the fact that they are not member of state armed forces, but they will lose their protection if they act in a manner that counts as direct participation in hostilities.

The type of conduct that will constitute direct participation in hostilities and thereby allow a person to be targeted is controversial and is not universally agreed upon. The concept of direct participation has been interpreted by the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) such that members of non-state armed groups may be targeted at any time due to having lost their civilian protection, but 'membership' is specifically defined as the carrying out of a 'continuous combat function'.<sup>14</sup> Therefore, individuals that a lay person might call a 'member' of such a group may not be a member in the eyes of international law under this interpretation, due to the function they carry out for the group, e.g. if they deal solely with propaganda or financial transactions.<sup>15</sup> Conversely, the United States has interpreted 'membership' on the basis of an individual's formal tie to a group, regardless of whether they have carried out any hostile act.<sup>16</sup>

The UK appears to adopt a more narrow interpretation of direct participation. The Joint Service Manual on Armed Conflict (JSM) does not deal with individuals who are members of non-state armed groups, instead asserting that under IHL civilians may not be targeted unless they are taking a direct part in hostilities.<sup>17</sup> The question of whether an individual is directly participating is viewed as 'a question of fact', illustrating that the UK's approach only contemplates attacks against those who are actually participating,<sup>18</sup> thereby excluding the possibility of strikes against individuals purely due to their formal membership of an armed group. Importantly, the JSM states that 'use of the words "are taking" emphasizes that a potential or future fighter may not be attacked as such'.<sup>19</sup> This presents a picture of the UK as maintaining a robust interpretation of this aspect of IHL which serves to limit the incidence of civilians being mistakenly targeted.

## The reports and international law

In light of this sketch of IHL and its interpretations, it is possible to consider how the MOD reports relate to this important area of international law. Clearly, under the UK's interpretation of IHL, it is necessary for a person to be carrying out acts that can, in and of themselves, be described as direct participation in hostilities. Under this interpretation of IHL it is not permissible to target a person solely due to their membership of a group. In providing an overview of air strikes conducted and detailing each of their facts and context, the reports

11 Protocol Additional to the Geneva Conventions (Protocol II), Article 13(1). Though this Protocol applies only to certain internal conflicts exhibiting specific features, many of its provisions, including Article 13, are binding on all states during all internal armed conflicts as they exist as an aspect of customary international law. See, Jean-Marie Henchaerts and Louise Doswald-Beck *Customary International Humanitarian Law, Volume I: Rules* (Cambridge University Press 2005).

12 Ibid, Article 13(2).

13 Ibid, Article 13(3).

14 Nils Melzer *Interpretive Guidance on the Notion of Direct Participation in Hostilities Under International Humanitarian Law* (ICRC 2009) 33.

15 Ibid, 51.

16 Department of Defense *Law of War Manual* (June 2015, updated December 2016) 228.

17 *The Joint Service Manual of the Law of Armed Conflict* (2004) JSP 383, 5.3.3, 15.8.

18 Ibid, 5.3.3.

19 Ibid, 15.6.5.

have the capacity to demonstrate why (at least in a broad sense) each air strike was lawful, by depicting the conduct that satisfies the criteria of direct participation in hostilities.

Unfortunately, while many of the reports of drone strikes during Operation Shader contain sufficient factual information to make an apparent case that a strike was in accordance with the relevant law on targeting, nearly half do not provide sufficient information to make such a determination. For instance, on 28 September 2017, a Reaper drone is described as having attacked a sniper team, which is clearly a lawful target, but also 'another group of terrorists, [and] a Daesh held building'.<sup>20</sup> Similarly, on 15 September 2017 a Reaper is described as having 'conducted two attacks ... with Hellfire missiles against terrorists moving through the area'.<sup>21</sup> There is no indication given in these reports on what basis it was decided that the people targeted could be lawfully killed. There is no reference to surrounding facts that demonstrate their participation in hostilities. It is not even stated that the individuals targeted were armed (which, regardless, may well not be sufficient to render someone a lawful target) much less that they were engaged in hostile acts.

This is stark when contrasted with other reports which contain rich narrative detail on the circumstances of a strike. A particular example of this is a report of a strike on 9 May 2017, in which a public execution of prisoners by ISIL was disrupted by a drone strike which targeted and killed a sniper positioned above the crowd.<sup>22</sup> In the report, detail is given as to the context of the strike, the fact that an execution was averted, even the fact that the prisoners who were about to be killed were 'shackled'. Mention is made of the fact that the crew of the Reaper worked out how to carry out the strike without endangering civilians.

The fact that this level of detail is provided for some strikes emphasises the lack of information contained within many others.

Of 360 reports of drone strikes analysed, 162 (45%) did not contain sufficient information to present a *prima facie* case of lawfulness under IHL. In addition, 10 reports refer to targets which are controversial under different interpretations of IHL - for instance engineering vehicles, involved in the construction of defences and potentially driven by civilians, which do not have an immediate offensive military purpose - therefore making it more difficult to state whether or not sufficient information had been given. This means that only 189 (53%) reports contain sufficient information to make it clear that it was, on the facts, lawful to target the person or object in question. This is very concerning and massively undermines the ability of the reports to render drone operations more transparent.

The situation is somewhat better though still problematic when considering reports into conventional air strikes. Based on the 'UK conventional operations in Iraq and Syria, partial set', out of 316 reports analysed insufficient detail was provided in 101 (32%). Conversely 201 (64%) contained sufficient detail and the remaining 14 referred to controversial targets under IHL. A similar spilt is identifiable when considering drone strikes in Afghanistan, the reports of which provide sufficient information in 63 out of 91 cases (69%), failing

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20 'British Forces Air Strikes in Iraq and Syria: September 2017' *Ministry of Defence* <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/british-forces-air-strikes-in-iraq-monthly-list/raf-air-strikes-in-iraq-and-syria-september-2017>.

21 *Ibid.*

22 'British Forces Air Strikes in Iraq and Syria: May 2017' *Ministry of Defence* <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/british-forces-air-strikes-in-iraq-monthly-list/may#tuesday-9-may>.

to do so in 27 (30%) and only referring to a controversial target once. This shows that, during Operation Shader, greater detail is apparently given in air strikes conducted by conventional aircraft than by drone, suggesting that drone reports have more of a propensity to lack transparency than those of conventional air strikes.

Thus it appears that there has been a greater tendency for the reports of drone strikes to lack the information necessary to demonstrate that, ostensibly, they comply with IHL rules on targeting. However, it would be wrong to overstate the difference between reports into drones and those of conventional air strikes. While drone reports are less likely to contain sufficient information, this problem affects both strands of reporting and is something that should be addressed generally by the MOD.

The fact that some air strikes are described in detail, particularly those that seem the most palatable,<sup>23</sup> makes the absence of detail in others difficult to understand. It is not suggested that the MOD include detail on the legal analysis that surrounds each air strike, but it ought at least to include enough of the factual information around a strike to enable a *prima facie* conclusion that a strike probably adhered to IHL in terms of targeting. This is particularly so given that it only takes a small number of words to enable such a conclusion.

Key to this problem is the failure to include facts surrounding the strike, though an integral aspect of this problem is the nature of the terms that are used in the reports to describe the individuals targeted. As such, the next section of this document will be solely concerned with the analysis of these terms.

## Terms used to denote targets

A wide range of terms are used within the MOD reports to denote the specific targets of individual air strikes. The process of coding the MOD reports identified 256 different terms (after homogenisation) across the three sets of reports. These range from some that are very precise, such as 'vehicle-mounted terrorist team, armed with rocket-propelled grenades' and '152mm howitzer and its tow vehicle' to others which are much more general, such as 'terrorist', 'building' or 'machine-gun team'.

There are some terms used which are highly problematic when considered in isolation, but it is vital when considering the MOD Reports that context is considered. For instance, a report from December 2017 into a drone strike refers to 'a group of men acting suspiciously.'<sup>24</sup> On its own, this would be entirely unacceptable and provide no indication of why the group were targeted. However, though this is the reason that the group was observed, it is not the reason that they were targeted; the report goes on to state that further observation established that they were in possession of a concealed mortar, and it is for this reason that they were targeted. On this basis the phrase 'a group of men acting suspiciously' is no longer problematic, emphasising the need for a consistently rich level of detail within the reports.

Of primary importance is the extent to which inappropriate terms are used to denote that the person killed was a lawful target, but which actually provide no

23 The video of the air strike on 9 May 2017 was released to media organisations, suggesting that it was particularly celebrated by the MOD. See, for instance, Josie Ensor 'RAF Drone Footage Shows the Moment a Missile Stops ISIL Carrying Out a Public Execution' (20 September 2017) *The Telegraph* <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2017/09/20/raf-drone-footage-shows-moment-missile-stops-public-execution/>.

24 'British Forces Air Strikes in Iraq and Syria: December 2017' *Ministry of Defence* <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/british-forces-air-strikes-in-iraq-monthly-list/december-air-strikes>.

evidence to support that implication. The main examples of this are the use of 'terrorist' and 'extremist', which suggest the person is a member of an armed group such as ISIS but which, on their own, say nothing concrete about them and what led to the conclusion that they could be lawfully killed. The use of these terms is of particular concern as they can reduce the extent to which a report provides a transparent account of an air strike, standing in for an exposition of the facts that demonstrate *why* a given individual was a lawful target. The use of these terms contributes to the problem of the failure to disclose facts relevant to the conclusion that a strike was lawful, as discussed in the section above.

The terms 'terrorist' and 'extremist' feature very heavily within the reports of air strikes during Operation Shader, both in terms of drones and conventional aircraft. These terms are present in 61% of reports of drone strikes and 42% of conventional air strikes. Of the three, 'terrorist' is the most common, appearing in 56% of reports of drone strikes and 37% of those detailing conventional air strikes.<sup>25</sup>

This provides a sense of the rhetoric used within the reports. Terms like 'terrorist' or 'extremist' are highly emotive and easily recognisable by members of the general public. These terms reflect the narratives presented in the media of the UK and US's ongoing fight against global armed-groups. However, there is nothing within the term 'terrorist' or 'extremist' that indicates that a person is targetable under IHL. They are not legal terms, and, in the absence of additional facts, they do not indicate the reality of whether or not the person targeted in an air strike was a lawful target under IHL. That is not to say that those people are *not* targetable, but such a determination cannot be made without further information. Holding extreme views does not render a person liable to be killed, nor, necessarily, does membership of terrorist group.

As the terms serve no real purpose in demonstrating the lawfulness of a particular air strike, it is unclear for what reason they are used, and who it is who decides whether a person killed by a drone was a 'terrorist' or an 'extremist'. It is possible that the terms are used to confer a sense of legitimacy to the public, implying that those killed deserved it. Another possibility is that the use of these terms is a result of their prevalence within common parlance when discussing groups such as ISIS. It is possible only to speculate as to why these terms have featured so heavily, though whatever the reason their use is questionable and undermines the ability of the reports to provide a transparent account of drone use and Operation Shader.

The percentages given above represent the extent to which the terms appear in the reports at all, rather than the extent to which they are used discretely to denote the target of a strike. For instance, 'terrorist sniper' contains the term 'terrorist' and so would add to the overall use of the term as depicted in the above percentages, but it does not represent an instance of the term 'terrorist' being used as the sole term denoting a target. In coding the data, 'terrorist sniper' would become 'sniper' rather than 'terrorist'. This is because additional information has been given as to the reason why a person has been targeted - it is not because they are a terrorist, but that because they are a sniper that they have been targeted. In contrast to this, there are many instances in which, for example, 'terrorist' has been used as the only term denoting a targetable individual, and it is these that will now be considered.

As stated, the use of 'terrorist' and 'extremist' as the sole term denoting a target is particularly problematic when considering lawfulness under IHL and the

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25 This is based on automated analysis of the full set of drone and conventional air strike reports.

reports. Comparing the reports of drone air strikes and those carried out by conventional aircraft during Operation Shader, some interesting distinctions emerge. In reports detailing drone operations, the term 'terrorist' makes up 19% of the instances of terms used to denote a target<sup>26</sup> while 'terrorist' and 'extremist' considered together make up 23%. Conversely, of reports into air strikes with conventional aircraft, 'terrorist' represents only 6% of targets and 'terrorist' and 'extremist' together describe 8% of targets.<sup>27</sup> Thus, for some reason, it appears that drones are used more often to strike at targets defined as a 'terrorist' or 'extremist'. Both the reports of drone air strikes and those of conventional aircraft contain terms denoting targets that are more immediately recognisable as being legitimate objectives (such as 'mortar team', 'weapons stockpile' and 'rocket launcher'); the difference is that, in relation to conventional aircraft, terms such as 'terrorist' occur with a similar frequency to others, whereas in drone strike reports they are significantly more common.<sup>28</sup> It is not possible to assess the reasons for this difference purely from an analysis of the MOD reports but the fact that such a distinction exists is significant and should be addressed.

Considering the trends in the use of the terms 'terrorist' and 'extremist' over time it appears that their use is increasing. In relation to MOD reports into drone strikes, in 2014 the terms appeared in 22% of reports, increasing to 64% in 2015, 59% in 2016 and finally 69% in 2017. As a proportion of terms used to identify a target within the report, the terms comprised 16% of targets in 2014, 17% in 2015, 22% in 2016 and 53% in 2017. Considered over the course of just four years, this increase in usage is significant. By comparison, of reports into conventional air strikes, the terms 'terrorist' and 'extremist' appear in 36% of reports in 2014, 55% in 2015, 41% in 2016 and 37% in 2017. As a proportion of terms used in isolation to denote a target during a conventional air strike, the terms made up 6% of targets in 2014, 7% in 2015, 10% in 2016 and 5% in 2017. Thus, while the use of these terms in conventional air strikes appears to have remained fairly constant, their use in reports of drone strikes has risen significantly.

In contrast to the reports of operations against ISIS, an analysis of the MOD reports into strikes by drones in Afghanistan reveals that terms such as 'terrorist' and 'extremist' are not used at all. Instead the term 'insurgent' is used very commonly, appearing in 71% of reports, and making up 55% of targets. The term 'insurgent' grew in prevalence over the course of drone operations within Afghanistan, appearing in 53% of reports published in 2010, 81% in 2011 and 95% in 2012. Conversely, its use as a term denoting a target in and of itself reduced over time: it comprised 78% of targets in 2010, 64% in 2011 and 34% in 2012.

As with terms such as 'terrorist' it is arguable that 'insurgent', though perhaps more inherently linked with armed conflict, says very little about whether a given person may be lawfully targeted. This therefore represents a problem in terms of the transparency of the MOD reports in allowing an understanding of the facts surrounding specific air strikes and what it was that made a specific person a lawful target to be replaced by the use of non-technical words that say nothing about the acts of a person which led to them being killed.

26 This is as opposed to the percentage of reports—a single report may contain several terms denoting targets.

27 This figure is based on the 'UK conventional operations in Iraq and Syria, partial set'.

28 For instance, while 'terrorist' represents 19% of terms used to denote targets, the next most common term ('extremist') represents 5% of terms used. Considering 'terrorist', 'extremist' and 'fighter' cumulatively, within the drone reports these represent 27% of terms, compared with the next highest ('mortar team') which comprises just 3% of terms.



A further concern in relation to the Afghanistan drone strike reports is that in 12 of the reports no term was used at all to describe the individual or object targeted. This is not an insignificant amount, representing 13% of the total. This is clearly problematic in terms of assessing the nature and lawfulness of a given air strike as it leaves out all information relevant to such an assessment. On the plus-side, this appears to have improved significantly over time: while in 2010 and 2011 no term was given in 15% and 16% of reports respectively, in 2012 this had dropped to 5% and in the reports into operations against ISIS there is just a single instance in relation to conventional aircraft as well as in relation to drones.

Some tentative conclusions can be reached from this analysis. There is a problematic tendency within reports into strikes by both drones and conventional aircraft to use terms such as 'terrorist' to denote a targetable individual. However, it is much more common for these terms to appear in the reports into drone strikes as a term in and of itself denoting a targetable person ('terrorist' rather than 'terrorist carrying a rocket propelled grenade'). This has the impact of stymieing the transparency that the reports surely seek to promote, as it obscures the objective facts upon which a decision to target a person was actually taken. As a result, it can be said that the reporting into drone strikes is generally less transparent than that of conventional air strikes as, on the whole, it is less clear why drones are targeting the people that they target.

As stated above, it would be beneficial for the MOD to include additional facts regarding the choice of targets to confirm the lawfulness of strikes. This would be further improved by dispensing with terms like 'terrorist' and instead referring to what it is about a given individual that makes them a lawful target. Terms and buzzwords should not be used to stand in for facts and allowing them to do so removes much of the positive potential that the MOD reports represent.

## Terms used to describe strikes

The issue of the representation of air strikes raises questions on two fronts. First, there is the issue of what is meant by the term 'air strike', which can have various intended meanings. Second, is the issue of how the actual moment of the strike—when missiles hit their target—is represented in the narrative reports produced by the MOD.

### The meaning of an 'air strike'

The term 'air strike' can cause considerable confusion for those trying to investigate and assess the impact of military action. It is regularly used as a metric by ministers, defence officials and the press as a means to communicate the quantity and intensity of aerial bombing. However, what is actually covered by the phrase can vary hugely. At one end of the spectrum an 'air strike' can mean a single aircraft firing a single missile or bomb at a single target, while at the other it can mean multiple aircraft (sometimes even from different nations) launching multiple bombs and missiles at multiple targets within the same geographical area or time frame. As an example, in January 2017 the RAF flew 44 missions in which weapons were fired; during these 44 missions, 77 weapons were used, and 25 'strikes' were reported. By contrast, in February 2017, 32 missions involved weapons being fired, 55 weapons were used yet 41 'strikes' were reported.<sup>29</sup> Thus there is a clear disconnect between the various figures provided.

<sup>29</sup> Based on data compiled from MOD responses to Drone Wars information requests. See [www.dronewars.net/foi](http://www.dronewars.net/foi). For a full list of 2017 data, see Table 3, annexed to this document.

Further, ten months into the campaign against ISIS, the MOD changed its methodology for calculating the number of air strikes it had undertaken, adopting that used by the US. Illustrating the impact of this change, over the ten months from September 2014 to June 2015 the RAF had carried out 308 strikes against ISIS under the UK methodology.<sup>30</sup> Using the new US methodology however, this was amended to 226 strikes, a reduction of 26%. Part of the reason for the reduction is a result of differences in how 'dynamic targeting procedures' (unplanned attacks against 'targets of opportunity') are reported. Under the UK methodology these would likely constitute multiple air strikes as weapons are fired at a target over time and as it moves locations. Conversely, under the US approach, this would count as a single 'air strike' as the various attacks all fit within one engagement.<sup>31</sup>

It should be noted that the vast majority of air strikes undertaken in Iraq and Syria have been launched under dynamic targeting procedures. In 2015, for example, according to MOD figures only 5% of UK air strikes in 2015 were pre-planned.<sup>32</sup> As dynamically targeted strikes are launched in a short time-frame and without pre-planning it is generally recognised that such strikes are more likely to cause civilian casualties than those that are pre-planned. Pre-planning for strikes gives time to assess possible dangers to civilians and enable strikes to be launched in a way that can minimise such danger. The fact that transparency in regard to the actual number of strikes in this area is being lessened is a particular cause for concern.

A related problem is the reconciliation of narrative details released by the MOD about UK strikes in its regular updates with statistical data about strikes released by MOD under Freedom of Information rules.

Due to the vagueness of some of the narrative reports—particularly in relation to the use of multiple weapons against multiple targets—it is often not possible to reconcile the two, giving the impression that information is missing or being hidden. The clearest example of this occurred in March 2018 when, due to the lower level of air operations, it is easier to demonstrate the inconsistencies. MOD updates in March 2018 reported three separate UK Reaper attacks, targeting an enemy drone, two people on a motorbike and a 'group of terrorists'.<sup>33</sup> However, data released to Drone Wars under FOI rules show that UK Reapers in fact launched 19 Hellfire missiles in March 2018.<sup>34</sup> As a result of this, the impression is given that information in the narrative reports has been left out, which severely undermines the extent to which the narrative reports promote transparency.

## The narrative representation of the act of striking

There are many terms and phrases in the MOD reports used to describe the act of a specific strike itself. Once the data was coded and homogenised, 68 different terms for this purpose were identified across the three data sets.<sup>35</sup>

30 Michael Fallon 'Iraq/Syria: Operations Update' House of Commons Written Statement (16 July 2015) HCWS132 <https://www.parliament.uk/business/publications/written-questions-answers-statements/written-statement/Commons/2015-07-16/HCWS132/>.

31 Based on MOD FOI response, 2 September 2015, available at [https://dronewarsuk.files.wordpress.com/2015/11/20150902\\_foi07034\\_mr\\_cole.pdf](https://dronewarsuk.files.wordpress.com/2015/11/20150902_foi07034_mr_cole.pdf).

32 Chris Cole 'FOI reveals only 5% of British air strikes in Iraq and Syria are pre-planned' (16 June 2016) *Drone Wars* <https://dronewars.net/2016/06/15/foi-reveals-only-5-of-british-airstrikes-in-iraq-and-syria-are-pre-planned/>.

33 Update: air strikes against Daesh, published 4 April 2018. Available at [https://dronewarsuk.files.wordpress.com/2018/05/update\\_-air-strikes-against-daesh-gov-uk-4-april-2018.pdf](https://dronewarsuk.files.wordpress.com/2018/05/update_-air-strikes-against-daesh-gov-uk-4-april-2018.pdf); 'British Forces Air Strikes in Iraq and Syria: March 2018' *Ministry of Defence* <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/british-forces-air-strikes-in-iraq-monthly-list/raf-air-strikes-in-iraq-and-syria-march-2018>.

34 MoD FOI response, 1 May 2018, <https://dronewarsuk.files.wordpress.com/2018/05/20180501-foi201804615cole-response.pdf>

35 For a full list of terms and the number of times they appear, see Tables 4 and 5 in the appendix.

There is little that is controversial about the terms used. In relation to drone strikes under Operation Shader, the most commonly used term is 'destroy' which comprises 27% of instances of terms used to describe a strike (occurring 167 times). 'Destroy' is used in the MOD reports as in the phrase 'A Hellfire missile destroyed the target.'<sup>36</sup> Predominantly, the term 'destroy' was used in relation to air strikes against objects rather than individuals. The next most popular terms are 'attack' (27% of instances, occurring 158 times) and 'strike' (13% of instances, occurring 78 times). These terms were more likely to be used to describe air strikes against individuals. These figures are broadly similar with those of air strikes in Iraq and Syria undertaken with conventional aircraft.<sup>37</sup> These three terms are prosaic in their depiction of the air strikes carried out by drones and appear not to be overly euphemistic in a manner that implies an attempt to downplay the gruesome reality of these operations. Nevertheless, it is of course the case that the rendering of any violent event into a brief term or phrase has the effect of sanitising it, but it is submitted that this cannot really be avoided given the nature of the reports in question.

Less common terms used in the MOD reports are also worthy of note. On 30 occasions, a drone strike is referred to as a 'direct hit' or it is stated that the crew 'scored a direct hit'. Terms such as this are arguably inappropriate for use within an air strike report, having the apparent effect of aggrandising the act, emphasising the prowess of the RAF and the capability of the weapon over the fact that the air strike has resulted in the death of a person or people. Further, the notion of 'scoring' conjures the images of a game, which reduces the gravity of the situation. This regrettable choice of words recalls the common refrain that using drones in warfare creates a 'PlayStation' mentality.<sup>38</sup> Other terms are similarly inappropriate, such as 'pick off',<sup>39</sup> 'silence'<sup>40</sup> and 'knock out'.<sup>41</sup> The occasional use of this kind of inappropriate descriptor is not unique to drone reports, with similar terms appearing in the reports of conventional aircraft, though to a slightly lesser extent. Therefore it appears that this kind of wording is not necessarily a product of the characteristics of drone combat, but instead a minor tendency within air warfare more generally. Regardless, it is submitted that such terminology should not feature in air strike reports to avoid downplaying the violent reality of conflict.

In contrast to this, there are no examples of this kind of language in the available data on drone strikes in Afghanistan. In fact, 10 of those reports (9% of terms used) specifically state that a person was 'killed', emphasising rather than obscuring the death at the centre of the operation.

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36 'British Forces Air Strikes in Iraq and Syria: July 2017' *Ministry of Defence* <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/british-forces-air-strikes-in-iraq-monthly-list/raf-air-strikes-in-iraq-and-syria-july-2017>.

37 These figures are drawn from the 'UK conventional operations in Iraq and Syria, partial set'. 'Destroy' comprises 24% of terms used (118 instances), 'attack' comprises 22% (110 instances) and 'strike' comprises 12% (59 instances).

38 Report of the Special Rapporteur on extrajudicial, summary or arbitrary executions, Philip Alston: Addendum: Study on targeted killings, UN General Assembly (28 May 2010) UN. Doc A/HRC/14/24/Add.6 para. 84.

39 '...the Reaper hunted targets in the city centre, using three Hellfire missiles to pick off groups of extremists caught moving in the open.' 'British Forces Air Strikes in Iraq and Syria: December 2016' *Ministry of Defence* <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/british-forces-air-strikes-in-iraq-monthly-list/december-2016>.

40 'A Hellfire missile through the building's roof silenced the terrorist fire.' 'British Forces Air Strikes in Iraq and Syria: July 2017' *Ministry of Defence* <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/british-forces-air-strikes-in-iraq-monthly-list/raf-air-strikes-in-iraq-and-syria-july-2017>.

41 'using a second to knock out an armed truck which it had spotted reversing in and out of cover to fire bursts from a heavy machinegun.' 'British Forces Air Strikes in Iraq and Syria: January 2017' *Ministry of Defence* <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/british-forces-air-strikes-in-iraq-monthly-list/raf-air-strikes-in-iraq-and-syria-january-2017>.

However, in contrast to this, 12% of the Afghanistan drone reports give no term to describe the strike. This is either because no detail at all was given for a strike, or where only a limited amount was provided. For instance, the report of an air strike on 5 December 2010 simply states that a 'significant operation was concluded with use of Hellfire direct fire missile', thus giving no indication of what was targeted. This is highly problematic as it removes the moment of the air strike from the account, in effect obscuring the reality conveyed by the report. This has the effect of reducing the transparency that the reporting of air strikes ought to be there to promote. Thankfully, this is not a tendency that is replicated within the more recent reports into drone and conventional strikes under Operation Shader, which is a positive development.

In conclusion, it would appear to be incorrect to suggest that drone strikes are treated euphemistically or in a manner that obscures the violent reality of air strikes. This effectively mirrors the approach taken to conventional air strike reports, suggesting that, at least on the institutional level of the reports in questions, the two types of air strike are not treated differently. While certain terms are used that appear inappropriate for the description of operations in which people are killed, this is only the case in a minority of reports, and they appear with similar frequency in the reports of both drone and conventional air strikes.

## The presence of civilians within the MOD reports

A further issue worthy of exploration is that of the presence of civilians within the reports. References to civilians demonstrates a number of things. First, where the facts allow, it shows that civilians have not been killed or hurt in a strike. Second, it demonstrates that the impact of a strike upon civilians is a key consideration when deciding to carry out a particular strike. Third, it creates the presumption that obligations under IHL have been taken seriously: that civilians are not targeted,<sup>42</sup> that necessary precautions against harm to civilians have been taken,<sup>43</sup> and that any incidental civilian deaths or injuries that occur are proportionate to the military advantage produced by a particular strike (the principle of proportionality).<sup>44</sup>

In the reports into drone strikes within Operation Shader, only 16 refer to civilians and the need to avoid killing them,<sup>45</sup> representing just over 4% of reports.<sup>46</sup> Generally, these instances refer to a drone crew checking an area for civilians before firing, though others are less explicit, instead referring to, for instance, the 'crew wait[ing] patiently until the targets were in open countryside'. In these cases it is clear that care has been taken to avoid harm to civilians and that precautions were taken, in accordance with the requirements of IHL.

42 As discussed above.

43 Jean-Marie Henchaerts and Louise Doswald-Beck *Customary International Humanitarian Law, Volume I: Rules* (Cambridge University Press 2005) 51, Rule 15.

44 Jean-Marie Henchaerts and Louise Doswald-Beck *Customary International Humanitarian Law, Volume I: Rules* (Cambridge University Press 2005) 46-50, Rule 14.

45 There are reports that refer to civilians more generally, i.e. in relation to them being impeded by a checkpoint, but presently we are only concerned with those in which civilians are discussed in relation to the strike itself.

46 In addition, the fact that a drone strike had potentially killed Syrian regime forces instead of ISIS members was clearly disclosed with the relevant report. 'British Forces Air Strikes in Iraq and Syria: September 2016' *Ministry of Defence* <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/british-forces-air-strikes-in-iraq-monthly-list/air-strike-september-2016>.

It is therefore highly concerning that the remaining 96% of reports make no mention of civilians. Not only does this provide no indication as to whether or not civilians have been negatively affected by air strikes, it also fails to demonstrate that these air strikes have been carried out with requisite precaution.

Surprisingly, the situation is even worse when considering the reports of conventional air strikes, with only five – just under 2% – explicitly referring to the avoidance of civilian harm, illustrating that it is far from being a problem unique to drone operations. In fact, the reports into drone strikes in Afghanistan are far better at placing civilians within the narrative of air strikes, references to the avoidance of civilian harm being present in 21 available reports (23%). In one instance of an air strike by a drone in Afghanistan that resulted in civilian deaths the report acknowledges the fact, giving the numbers of those killed and injured, as well as demonstrating a degree of contrition.<sup>47</sup>

In order to improve transparency, each MOD report should include whether or not civilians were present in the vicinity of a strike, or whether it was unknown if civilians were in the area. While some strikes take place far away from civilian areas, others target urban areas where the likelihood of civilian casualties is much greater. The virtual air brushing of civilians from all strike reports together with the blanket assertion that there is ‘no credible evidence of civilian casualties’ (held until the recent acknowledgement of the accidental killing of a civilian<sup>48</sup>) is not compatible with the volume of civilian casualty reports from on the ground compiled by groups such as Airwars.<sup>49</sup> As a recently retired senior RAF officer stated earlier this year, it is not ‘credible to the average listener that we have not caused any civilian casualties’.<sup>50</sup> Transparency about the presence or not of civilians would increase the credibility of UK reporting. It cannot be presumed that civilians are simply not harmed by air strikes.

## Miscellaneous additional findings

There are other points of interest that can be drawn out of the reports through systematic analysis that are worthy of note.

The first of these is the extent to which the reports emphasise the technical capabilities of drones. In fact, this occurs much less than might be expected: while some reports of drone strikes in Iraq and Syria do refer to the abilities of the drones involved in the strike – for instance discussing the ‘very long endurance, precision weaponry and advanced surveillance equipment’ of a Reaper<sup>51</sup> – just as often the reports instead emphasise the technical capability of the missile used rather than the drone. This is reflected in the reports of conventional air strikes, in which the skills of Tornado and Typhoon pilots are praised to the same extent as the capabilities of the missiles they fire. It should be noted, however, that in general this is not something that occurs much in the reports, being apparent in just 12 reports of drone strikes and 15 of conventional air strikes.

47 ‘Sadly, four Afghan civilians were also killed and a further two Afghan civilians were injured’ (25 March 2011) on file with author, original source unavailable.

48 Ewan MacAskill ‘Syria: RAF admits drone strike killed civilian in attack targeting ISIS’ (2 May 2018) *The Guardian* <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/may/02/syria-raf-airstrike-kills-civilian-uk-campaign>.

49 Civilian and Friendly Fire Casualties *Airwars* <https://airwars.org/civilian-casualty-claims/>

50 ‘Interview of Air Marshall Greg Bagwell by Chris Cole, Drone Wars UK’ <https://dronewars.net/2018/01/08/thinking-war-is-bloodless-is-a-mistake-talking-drones-and-remote-war-with-air-marshall-bagwell/>

51 ‘British Forces Air Strikes in Iraq and Syria: September 2017’ *Ministry of Defence* <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/british-forces-air-strikes-in-iraq-monthly-list/december-air-strikes>.

A metaphor that appears in some of the drone reports but not those of conventional air strikes, is that of the drone and its crew 'hunting' its target. The metaphor is not prevalent, occurring in only nine reports, but its presence is remarkable. Much like the use of quasi-colloquial terms to denote the act of an air strike, the image of a drone hunting for people to target transforms the act of a drone operation into a dynamic of predator and prey. Perhaps this is unsurprising given the foreboding names of the two most common armed drone so far, the Reaper and, literally, the Predator. There is clearly a feeling somewhere that this type of rhetoric suits the drone, a weapon system that is able to hover and observe potential targets, almost shark-like. It is submitted that the hunting image is inappropriate for use during an armed conflict and should not feature within the MODs reports.

# 4 Conclusion

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The overwhelming picture that emerges from the analysis of the MOD reports is one of an attempt at transparency that often falls short. The attempt by the MOD and UK Government should be welcomed: the fact that reports of air strikes are made available on the MOD website is positive. It is a step towards ensuring that UK military operations are capable of proper scrutiny and it is one that few, if any, other states carry out.

However, proper scrutiny is only possible where sufficient information is given, and in many cases, this does not happen. While reports into drone and conventional air strikes carried out as part of Operation Shader often lack the information necessary to properly interrogate the air strike depicted, this propensity is stronger within the reports of drone operations. The fact that nearly half of all reports into drone strikes fail to convey sufficient information for even cursory or superficial assessments in light of IHL is highly concerning. It means that while the reports provide an apparently transparent framework, in reality they fail in this regard.

Though this is not a problem unique to the reporting of drone strikes, it is undeniably more prevalent with them. The much greater use within drone reports of terms like 'terrorist', and 'extremist' as the stated target is a big problem with the MOD reports. It is impossible to conclude why this is the case, or why this type of target comprises such a large proportion of those engaged by drone but, regardless of the reason, the overall impact is clear: the reports into drone strikes are not consistently transparent.

The absence of civilians within the reports is a general problem, affecting both drone strikes and conventional air strikes. This is an issue that impacts upon the ability of the MOD reports to produce a transparent picture of Operation Shader and, due to its extent, it would not be an exaggeration to describe the problem as systemic. Civilians must occupy a more central position within the reporting of air strikes, particularly in light of claims surrounding drones that they are capable of limiting civilian casualties. With the addition of a handful of words such as 'there were no civilians present', the potential of the MOD reports to create transparency would be hugely enhanced.

The reports represent an opportunity for the MOD to provide an open and transparent account of military operations. So far, this opportunity has, to a

large extent not been taken up. Nevertheless, when, in the past, this lack of detail has been pointed out, improvements have been made. In 2016, Jack McDonald of Kings College conducted a study for the All Party Parliamentary Group on Drones and Airwars that examined the MOD's public reporting of the location of strikes by manned and unmanned aircraft in 2014 and 2015. The study found that while 76% of the reports of manned aircraft strikes included location details with a high level of precision (the name of a specific town or village) only 13% of drone strikes included such details. Once this difference was highlighted and reported to officials, it was noticeable that reporting on the location of UK drones strikes dramatically improved.<sup>52</sup> It is therefore hoped that, having identified other important areas in which detail is lacking, the MOD may alter its reporting to fill these gaps.

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<sup>52</sup> 'Limited Accountability: A transparency audit of the Coalition air wars against so-called Islamic State' (December 2016) Airwars/Remote Control, 19, [https://airwars.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/12/Airwars-report\\_Web-FINAL1.compressed.pdf](https://airwars.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/12/Airwars-report_Web-FINAL1.compressed.pdf).



# Appendix

Table 1: Target terms used and their frequency (drone strikes)

Term used to describe target	Number of occurrences	% of targets so described	Term used to describe target	Number of occurrences	% of targets so described
terrorist(s)	129	19.17%	stockpile of explosives	4	0.59%
vehicle(s)	46	6.84%	supply truck	4	0.59%
position(s)	42	6.24%	terrorist truck	4	0.59%
extremist(s)	35	5.20%	car-bomb	3	0.45%
fighter(s)	32	4.75%	heavy machine-gun team	3	0.45%
mortar team	29	4.31%	heavy weapons team	3	0.45%
mortar	19	2.82%	improvised armoured vehicle	3	0.45%
truck-bomb	17	2.53%	recoilless anti-tank gun	3	0.45%
checkpoint	16	2.38%	recoilless anti-tank gun team	3	0.45%
truck	11	1.63%	sniper team	3	0.45%
armed pickup truck	10	1.49%	bunker	2	0.30%
building	10	1.49%	defensive positions	2	0.30%
heavy machine-gun	10	1.49%	explosives	2	0.30%
engineering vehicle	9	1.34%	facilities	2	0.30%
armed truck	8	1.19%	fortified position	2	0.30%
target(s)	8	1.19%	group of Daesh	2	0.30%
armoured personnel carrier	7	1.04%	machine-gun position	2	0.30%
machine-gun team	7	1.04%	observation post	2	0.30%
anti-aircraft gun	6	0.89%	pick-up truck	2	0.30%
armed terrorist(s)	6	0.89%	rocket and mortar teams	2	0.30%
rocket launchers	6	0.89%	sniper	2	0.30%
bulldozer	5	0.74%	strongpoint	2	0.30%
fighting position	5	0.74%	supply vehicle	2	0.30%
mechanical excavator	5	0.74%	terrorist group	2	0.30%
mortar position	5	0.74%	terrorist location	2	0.30%
terrorist team	5	0.74%	terrorist threat	2	0.30%
ammunition truck	4	0.59%	threat	2	0.30%
armoured truck	4	0.59%	tunnel	2	0.30%
armoured vehicle	4	0.59%	weapons cache	2	0.30%
artillery piece	4	0.59%	weapons stockpile	2	0.30%
rocket-propelled grenade team	4	0.59%			

(Includes only those terms used more than once)

Table 2: Target terms used and their frequency (conventional air strikes)

Term used to describe target	Number of occurrences	% of targets so described	Term used to describe target	Number of occurrences	% of targets so described
building	45	8.84%	engineering vehicle	4	0.79%
terrorist(s)	32	6.29%	heavy machine-gun team	4	0.79%
heavy machine-gun	31	6.09%	road	4	0.79%
position	28	5.50%	accommodation	3	0.59%
mortar	24	4.72%	armoured vehicle	3	0.59%
sniper	24	4.72%	factory producing truck-bombs	3	0.59%
machine-gun	16	3.14%	firing position	3	0.59%
Mortar team	16	3.14%	anti-tank weapons	2	0.39%
strong-point	15	2.95%	armed vehicle	2	0.39%
weapons stockpile	15	2.95%	checkpoint	2	0.39%
rocket launchers	14	2.75%	crane	2	0.39%
tunnel	14	2.75%	fighting position	2	0.39%
vehicle	14	2.75%	fortified positions	2	0.39%
armed truck	11	2.16%	headquarters	2	0.39%
extremist(s)	11	2.16%	heavy weapon	2	0.39%
truck-bomb	11	2.16%	machine-gun team	2	0.39%
armoured personnel carrier	9	1.77%	main battle tank	2	0.39%
bunker	9	1.77%	medium machine-gun	2	0.39%
fighter(s)	8	1.57%	recoilless anti-tank gun	2	0.39%
artillery position	7	1.38%	rocket team	2	0.39%
ammunition stockpile	6	1.18%	target	2	0.39%
defensive position	5	0.98%	terrorist targets	2	0.39%
excavator	5	0.98%	terrorists armed with RPGs	2	0.39%
anti-aircraft position	4	0.79%	truck-bomb factory	2	0.39%
command post	4	0.79%			

(Includes only those terms used more than once)

Table 3: UK air weapons fired in Iraq and Syria in 2017, comparing metrics

Month	Sorties firing weapons	Weapons fired	Strikes reported
Jan-17	44	77	25
Feb-17	32	55	41
Mar-17	62	114	43
Apr-17	33	63	31
May-17	79	143	59
Jun-17	87	155	57
Jul-17	73	129	58
Aug-17	67	120	64
Sep-17	73	115	55
Oct-17	26	48	22
Nov-17	18	31	11
Dec-17	16	28	11
Total	610	1,078	477

Table 4: Strike terms used and their frequency (drone strikes)

Term used to describe a strike	Number of occurrences	% of strikes so described
destroy	167	28.11%
attack	158	26.60%
strike	78	13.13%
engaged	24	4.04%
used ... against	21	3.54%
kill	17	2.86%
eliminated	17	2.86%
delivered	16	2.69%
direct hit	16	2.69%
score a direct hit	14	2.36%
accounted for	12	2.02%
hit	10	1.68%
air strike	10	1.68%
target	7	1.18%
demolish	5	0.84%
silence	3	0.51%
employed ... against	2	0.34%
fired a ... hellfire missile	2	0.34%
knock out	2	0.34%
prosecute	2	0.34%
remove	2	0.34%
badly damaged	1	0.17%
dealt with	1	0.17%
detonated	1	0.17%
disposed of	1	0.17%
missiles were deployed	1	0.17%
neutralised	1	0.17%
no term to describe strike	1	0.17%
pick off	1	0.17%
sank	1	0.17%
this proved no defence against the reaper, armed with hellfire missiles	1	0.17%

Table 5: Strike terms used and their frequency (conventional air strikes)

Term used to describe a strike	Number of occurrences	% of strikes so described
destroy	118	23.51%
attack	110	21.91%
strike	59	11.75%
used	42	8.37%
bombed	23	4.58%
hit	18	3.59%
demolished	17	3.39%
scored a direct hit	11	2.19%
delivered	10	1.99%
engage	10	1.99%
used ... against	10	1.99%
dealt with	7	1.39%
direct hit	7	1.39%
silenced	7	1.39%
target	7	1.39%
accounted for	6	1.20%
dropped	5	1.00%
eliminate	5	1.00%
collapsed	4	0.80%
removed the threat	4	0.80%
air strike	3	0.60%
disrupted	3	0.60%
crater	2	0.40%
cut	2	0.40%
knocked out	2	0.40%
bomb attack	1	0.20%
Brimstone attack	1	0.20%
cleared	1	0.20%
detonated	1	0.20%
directed	1	0.20%
fire	1	0.20%
kill	1	0.20%
neutralising the threat	1	0.20%
remove	1	0.20%
set ablaze	1	0.20%

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