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**Empathy, Local Knowledge and the Construction of Suffering: an  
Analysis of the Epistemological Limitations of the US Militaries  
Approach to Civilian Harm Mitigation and Reporting**

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## **Abstract**

Civilian harm mitigation and reporting is a mechanism which is used by liberal democracies to illustrate they have taken all measures to prevent harm to civilians during conflict, and therefore abide to principles of Just War theory. However, vast amounts of civilian suffering continue to take place, with no repercussion to the governments at fault, regardless of these technologies. Using the case of the US military during Operation Inherent Resolve in Syria and Iraq from 2014-2018, this research seeks to address this puzzle. In doing so it will attempt to bridge the gap between the work of the US military, and that of non-profit organisations who represent local experiences. This research will make the case that the US militaries failure to construct suffering adequately due to the association of suffering with femininity and the use of masculinised language during conflict. Furthermore, it will illustrate how local knowledge is rejected on the basis of its foundation in emotion and subjectivities which are also associated with femininity. This contradicts the militaries own subjectivities in their decision making found through this research. All in all, this will challenge the ability for the US military to hold the responsibility of mitigating and reporting civilian harm. Making the case that, for civilian harm mitigation and reporting to be genuinely successful, modern conflicts must no longer be constructed along the lines that they can be considered 'just'.

## **Chapter I**

### **Introduction**

Civilian harm mitigation and reporting during the 21st century has gained attention in Western countries in recent years. The advent of social media has meant that people local to conflict situations can share detailed information about the suffering which has taken place. Open source investigative organisations such as Airwars and Bellingcat, have used this information to create awareness and lobby militaries to improve measures which prevent civilian harm.

In the context of the invasion of Ukraine, this form of data collection has grown exponentially, and attention to the suffering caused by Russia has been prominent. However, the use of these channels to raise awareness of the civilian harm caused in the Middle East has been ongoing, yet there has been silence surrounding the civilians who have suffered during US-led coalition airstrikes in Iraq, Syria and Afghanistan since 2014 (Khan 2021; Philips & Schmitt 2021). Civilian harm mitigation measures are what is supposed to distinguish the US coalition from countries like Russia and Turkey in its significance as a tool which enshrines the Laws of Armed Conflict (LOAC) and the wider Just War tradition.

What is clear is that large amounts of this suffering continue to take place without any repercussions to the liberal democracies who are at fault. This is exemplified in the notable massacres of Mosul in March 2017 where an airstrike on 2 ISIS (Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant) snipers killed up to 230 civilians (Gibbons-Kneff 2017), Baghuz in March 2019 where at least 80 women and children were killed (Scripp 2021), and the more recent failure of the US-led

coalition wrongly targeting an aid worker, Zemarei Ahmadi, and nine of his family members, in Kabul in August 2021 (Luscombe 2021).

This continued suffering caused during modern conflict, regardless of the implementation of civilian harm mitigation and reporting techniques, challenges this as a tool which can adequately protect human security. Instead civilian harm mitigation and reporting leans more towards being a tool governments used to justify harm, through illustrating that liberal democracies abide by the Laws of Armed conflict (LOAC) (Smith 2021). In this sense this tool is a representation of the artificial nature of the Just War narrative which frames the wars that liberal democracies carry out as 'good' (Jackson 2005b). The entrenched nature of civilian harm mitigation and reporting, has been convincingly criticised by the fact that as long as the criteria of the LOAC are met it doesn't matter who, or how many, people are harmed (Smith 2021, p.49). Thus, serving the derealizing aims of military violence, prohibiting grief to those the coalition have killed (Butler 2004, p.37). Therefore, this mechanism is used instrumentally to uphold the status quo and prevent genuine prevention of civilian harm.

Problematising civilian harm mitigation and reporting in this way questions whether this can be considered a tool to prevent genuine human suffering, or a tool in which the suffering of civilians can be framed in a way which makes it permissible?

However, civilian harm mitigation and reporting is not solely a tool used by the government and military. Charity organisations and civil society work hard to attempt to prevent civilian harm through lobbying governments to make improvements to these mechanisms. Namely, Airwars, a

non-profit, open source investigation organisation which works closely to improve military practice and bring justice to civilians harmed by conflict (Ford & Richardson 2023, p.3). Through their rigorous methodology they collate international, local and social media sources to build and archive assessments with a grading system of likelihood (Airwars Methodology 2023). More than 70% of the US internal inquiries into civilian casualties caused by airstrikes in Syria and Iraq since 2014 have been based on casualty recording submitted by Airwars (Human Rights Council 2023, p.8). This statistic is significant when situated within the theory which argues that this mechanism is simply a tool which can be used to justify harm. If the US military is working so closely with civil society, how can this mechanism be manipulated in this way?

Although Airwars have suggested the 'US has shown clear demonstration of will' when it comes to tackling civilian harm (Woods 2016, p.15) it still estimates only 1,417 civilians have been killed whereas civil societies estimates put it as high as 13,253 in Operation Inherent Resolve (OIR) alone (Airwars 2023a). The fact that the US military has been praised for its attempt to tackle harm but that this vast disparity still exists makes this a fruitful example.

What's more, the US military has led the way in the global conflicts due to the global war on terror since 2001. Although Obama technically ended the war on terror in 2010 (Harnden 2010), various campaigns against terrorist networks have been ongoing including Operation Inherent Resolve (OIR) which is the focus of this research, but also in Somalia and Yemen. This makes the US military a great case study for reconciling civilian harm mitigation and reporting within the deeper theory.

Since the invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 there is a heightened prerogative for governments who profess liberal values to ensure civilian harm is prevented and reported upon. This is to distinguish liberal countries from the authoritarian regimes such as Russia and Turkey who are seen to target civilians indiscriminately. From this perspective the killing of innocence as a tactic brandishes the state as terrorists themselves (Byman 2005). Therefore, it is in the best interest of countries such as the US to work hard to make this distinction clear. What this research wishes to iterate is that from the perspective of the local people, the 'good intention' of liberal states makes no difference for the suffering which is inflicted on their lives. In this sense civilian harm mitigation and reporting has a questionable impact on human security.

The majority of analysis on civilian harm mitigation practices is conducted by these civil society organisations who recognise this as a specific procedure to focus attempts to build tangible recommendations for national governments (Woods 2016, Airwars 2022, Centres for Civilians in Conflict 2023). It is thus not in civil societies' best interest to situate this tool within related theories as these may hinder the ability to come to compromise when working alongside governments.

The research will seek to address where civilian harm and mitigation in practice fits into this theoretical puzzle through analysis of the US-led coalition campaign in Syria and Iraq during the height of Operation Inherent Resolve from September 2014 to September 2018. The operation is regarded as the 'last and least well known (as least in the West)' of the post 9/11 wars (Alexander 2022, p.218). The legal justification has a weak foundation in international law, with a basis in self-defence and some degree of invitation by the Iraqi government, although in the last case the same cannot be said for Syria (Gross 2017). The strategy was that of aggressive containment in



which support, mainly in the way of airstrikes was given to counter forces, on top of airstrikes to disrupt safe havens and finances (Ohlers 2017). Although this research does not wish to dwell on these weak legal foundations, this contextualises the importance of the civilian harm mitigation and reporting as a tool which is part of a wider construction of liberal democracies to frame their wars as just.

This was chosen as a case study to examine civilian harm mitigation and reporting not only because of the aforementioned praise the US has been awarded for its attempt to mitigate harm. Also, because there is an extensive data set of reporting from the US military due to a New York Times freedom of information request (Khan et al 2021). Although multiple nations took part to varying degrees throughout the campaign, there is a lack of clarity on the level of involvement of other nations. According to the coalition, each member state is responsible for the civilians it kills, it is clear that some partners such as Australia, Belgium and the Netherlands are less transparent than the US, who is taking steps to improve its monitoring (Woods 2016, pp. 7-11). Therefore, as the reporting is done solely by the US-military the US- military will be referred to as the accountable nation throughout. However, the fact that other nations may have been involved within these incidents must be considered throughout.

The US military's reporting on civilian harm offers valuable insight into the US-led coalition's 'thought process' when conducting airstrikes and fruitful data for understanding how they frame and interpret the harm that is taking place. On an epistemological level these reports represent the bridge between the bodily experience of local people and the US- led coalition's understanding of this experience.

Significantly, through preliminary exploration the question arose of: How two realities, one of the US military and the second of civil society representing local populations could exist side by side? Especially because the US government had in fact relied so heavily on data from organisations such as Airwars and pledged to make improvements to the prevention of civilian harm.

This research is going to fill this gap by addressing this puzzle from a social constructivist ontology in which 'different frames and interpretations lead to competing problematizations of violence' (Julian et al 2019, p.210). On the basis that the killing of civilians is rationalised through the frame of civilian harm mitigation and reporting as a tool of the laws of armed conflict more broadly.

In exploring these disparate realities this research found that little literature addressed the actual epistemological underpinnings of how the military and civil society understood the harm itself, and the difference between this which allowed the two realities to differ to such a large extent.

When investigating the epistemological basis of civilian harm mitigation and reporting what is clear is that it is unavoidable to take a gendered approach to analysis. Although there is recognition of how gender is a centred approach to addressing war (Khalili 2011), the connection of a gendered approach to understanding civilian harm mitigation has not been discussed in any depth. In simple terms, this research wishes to make the case for the need to move away from an

association of care with femininity, to an ethics of care altogether, to make genuine amends to the suffering caused to civilians during conflict.

Drawing on broader theory, this research initially found that civil societies ability to advocate for civilian harm mitigation during modern conflict may be epistemologically limited from a gendered perspective in three key and related ways. First, in addressing how suffering was under explored, literature suggested that because it takes place at the site of the body, which is considered private and intimate, it is thus considered feminine (Pain 2015, p. 66). Furthermore, this suffering is also associated with vulnerability which is associated with femininity (Wilcox 2014; Cunniff Gilson 2016). On the other hand, protection of those who suffer has taken the role of the masculine and is seen to represent the Just War tradition (Pain 2015, p.69). Feminist writers have raised the claim that vulnerability needs to be practised without the eradication of the agency of those who are vulnerable (Butler 2004, p.42). Thus, the concept of suffering, which civilians endure during conflict, is associated to femininity which leads to masculine institutions like the military attempting to ‘save’ civilians with a lack of understanding of their situation.

Second, the ‘sanitized description’ made by the military of harm is associated with masculinity and downplays the bodily experience of civilians leaving no room for the construction of suffering (Cohn 1993, p.232). This juxtaposes the emotive and empathetic response of local people which is associated with feminist epistemology (Julian et al 2019, p.215). Thus, two disparate constructions of reality are created in which common ground is limited.

Third, the emotion and experience which give foundation to the knowledge of local people, and therefore civil society is not considered a sound epistemological basis to inform the military's judgement on what kind of harm has taken place, because masculine state-centric forms of knowledge are prioritised (Hansen 2014). Thus, the knowledge basis of local people supported by civil society is rejected, further hindering the construction of suffering. These differing constructions of harm prevent a mutual understanding of the situation of local people within the conflict and create a key drawback to the prevention of civilian harm.

This research sets out to therefore situate civilian harm mitigation and reporting within this broader theory to explore the epistemological drawbacks to its use as a tool for protecting human security. The main questions which will help to facilitate this synergy of theory and practice will be: How do the US military construct human suffering? What knowledge informs this construction? It will answer these questions by analysing how the US military understands suffering through a discourse analysis on a range of the military reports from this time period.

First, it will address the underlying literature which gives foundation to this essay's investigation in chapter II. It will follow with the methodology in chapter III. This will explain that the analysis will focus broadly on how suffering is constructed through specific analysis of three main points. First it will analyse how the body is dehumanised within reports as a precursor for suffering to be justified in chapter IV. Then chapter V will address the second data point of the explicit construction of suffering with a focus on the language used. Chapter VI will address what knowledge basis informs this construction to see what hierarchies of knowledge exist in the context

of this mechanism. Finally, chapter VII will give a conclusion to this study by laying out the research findings and way ahead.

## **Chapter II**

### **Literature review**

An important element of this research is situating the tool of civilian harm mitigation and reporting in the broader theory, thus an extensive literature review is necessary. This literature review will be structured as follows, first it will address the pre-existing literature specifically on civilian harm mitigation and reporting. It will use this to illustrate the gap that is missing and how this leads the research to take a gendered approach.

Then it will address the importance of an understanding of social constructivism to the assumption that the civilian casualty files bridge the gap between two realities. Following this it will address the literature which covers the knowledge which informs these constructions. In this regard, it will build the argument that the military base their knowledge on observable and institutionalised forms of knowledge whereas local populations base their knowledge on experience. This experience informs civil society's mission to prevent civilian harm.

A deeper exploration of the epistemology of experience will go on to highlight how the experience of local people is likely to be rejected due to the privilege given to state-centric knowledge (Hansen 2014). The research will show how understanding different types of knowledge is deeply intertwined with a gendered approach. The literature review will thus address the importance of a gendered approach to civilian harm mitigation and reporting and illustrate that this connection is a key gap within the existing literature. Finally, it will address how the above

theory is enshrined within the discourse of the Just War tradition illustrating the importance of this research in challenging the notion that war can be made 'good'.

### **The research gap**

Within the literature, it is convincingly argued that the mechanism of civilian harm mitigation is a tool which the US military uses to rationalise killing (Smith 2021). This contradicts civil societies' and local populations' problematization of civilian harm mitigation as one which is supposed to prevent human suffering. Other authors have supported this, through exploring the ways in which civilian harm mitigation language is used to complete and contain the violence of the airstrikes (Wilke 2021, p.3). In this sense civilian harm mitigation and reporting is a tool to rationalise and justify harm, not to prevent it.

This conceptualisation of civilian harm mitigation and reporting illustrates its importance in the broader context of the Just War tradition as this tool directly represents the language of reporting that war is constructed as morally justifiable. Mainly because the reporting directly addresses the criteria which need to be met to abide by the Just War doctrine. Namely the civilian harm mitigation and reporting fits into the concept of *jus in bello* in which the right conduct takes place during war, this is codified within the Laws of Armed conflict (LOAC). The main elements of *jus in bello* are that of distinction in which acts of war are only directed at enemy combatants, or proportional in the sense that force must not be excessive to military advantage and finally military necessity, in which it must be intended to defeat the enemy (Walzer 1992). These criteria

are referred to throughout the reporting mechanisms evidenced within the common phrase within the US militaries press release when harm has taken place:

although all feasible precautions were taken and the decision to strike complied with the law of armed conflict, unintended civilian casualties unfortunately occurred (CJTF- OIR 2017, p.13).

However, following the argument that civilian harm mitigation and reporting is used to rationalise killing it is clear that the criteria are vague enough to prevent any criticism of violence enacted (Wilke 2021, p.15). This emphasises the importance of studying civilian harm mitigation and reporting because it is a key tool in which the theory of Just War is put into practice.

From the perspective that casualty mitigation is a tool within the Just War tradition, it is treated like a procedure and technology which can be refined to prop up the doctrine of Just War, one in which is a problem to be solved (Smith 2021, p. 54). This argument is reflected within the literature which has tackled specificities of the civilian harm mitigation and reporting process, such as the weakness in technicalities of reporting mechanisms (Bijl 2022), and the failures of reparation payment (Carroll & Schulzke 2013). However little has been done to address *why* these weaknesses exist. What's more, civil society groups such as Airwars work alongside the military to try and make improvements to military practice through this mechanism (Ford & Richardson 2023, p.3).

In August 2022 the US Department of Defence released a new civilian harm mitigation action and response plan in which new processes and institutions are said to be in the pipeline to make substantive changes (DOD 2022). However, there is little to suggest this will lead to an



evaluation of the previous harm caused where a vast disparity exists between the US evaluation of harm and that of civil society. This is most evident in the disparities of reporting between the US military and organisation's such as Airwars (2023). On top of the on the ground reporting conducted by Azmat Khan for the New York Times (Khan 2021a). Limited literature tackles the deeper foundational issue which prevents the 'refinement' of this tool from making any substantial change.

This research, therefore, wishes to move away from the focus of this as a tool which can be improved, and instead fill the gap to address the deeper epistemological basis. Namely how suffering is simultaneously allowed to take place through this mechanism yet denied to exist.

To address the basis of civilian harm mitigation and reporting from the perspective of civil society, it's important to understand it as a tool in the context of human security. 'Human security suggests that public policy must be directed at enhancing the personal security, welfare and dignity of individuals and communities' (Newman 2011, p.1749). Although there are other strategic reasons to prevent civilian harm such as building resilience and stabilisation, with the intention of lasting peace (MacLachlan 2022). This essay follows the argument that civil society wishes to report on civilian suffering because 'public awareness, care and concern are important goals' (Ford & Richardson 2023, p.3). In this sense it follows an ethics of care which Toronto argues should be treated as equal to the aforementioned political arguments (1993). Therefore, civil society wishes to protect civilians because it is the right thing to do.

On the other hand, the main purpose and outcome of war is causing injury (Scarry 1985). War theorists like Clausewitz argue it's a fallacy that war can be fought with minimal bloodshed (1976, p.75). Thus, there is a large amount of literature which challenges the ability of wars to be just and good (Booth 2000; Lewis & Stephen 2005). Especially in the context that although wars have been framed as 'new', violence is mainly directed at civilians (Kaldor 2013, p.3). What is clear is that military strategy defines what those involved do and do not care about (Zilincik 2022). From this perspective civilians are killed because it did not matter and therefore is a conscious and deliberate decision (Gregory 2004). This ultimately is therefore hard to reconcile with the aforementioned human security approach.

It has been argued that an increase of respect for human security fields has come from an increased empathy, in which sentiments are manipulated in a way that people imagine themselves in the shoes of the despised and oppressed to make the world a better place (Rorty 1993, p.127). It is important to situate civilian harm mitigation and reporting as a tool within this theory because it illustrates how these arguments can work in practice.

The literature points to the fact that the emotions which give drive to civil societies desire to stand up for those who cannot stand up for themselves, such as empathy, are underexplored (Crawford 2000; Ross 2013). Within the exceptions, when empathy is discussed it is associated with femininity. This is done explicitly in terms of the association of femininity with the 'attention to and care for living, dying and suffering' (Cohn 1993, p.235). This is important to consider when making the argument that civil society is taking this role of attention and care to the civilian population because of this is institutionalised with the association of the charity sector with

femininity (Bernal & Grewal 2014). This is not just important for understanding its epistemology, but for understanding how the charity sector is viewed by the military.

The reasons for this association of emotions and empathy with femininity within society negate the scope of this essay but should be addressed in brief. Historically, women were considered to be 'less emotionally regulated' than men (Brody & Hall 1993). To add to this some studies have suggested that women are biologically more empathetic than men (Toussaint & Webb 2005), however it is widely debated about whether this is due to biological or more due to social development (Chaplin 2015). As this essay leans towards a social constructivist approach it takes the position that this association has been constructed and reconstructed over time. Therefore, it follows the argument laid out by Hansen which is key to this essay:

Women were to reside in the private due to their fragile, emotional, short-sighted, everyday-oriented and irrational nature, while men were decisive, rational, responsible and long-term planners. These constructions of femininity and masculinity legitimised the public-private distinction, but were also simultaneously upheld and reproduced by discourses and practices that kept these understandings in place (Hansen 2014, p.23).

What is important is that this association between the female and care is not useful as it assumes an inferiority to this position, thus if women are seen to care more than men they are seen to deviate from the normal (Toronto 1987, p.646). What's more is conflict and violence as well as militarism itself are associated with masculinity (Baaz and Stern 2008, Cockburn 2013, Pain 2015). This illustrates a dichotomy between the masculine military and the feminised charity sector. And further raises concerns about the compatibility of assumptions made by the military on conflict with those made by civil society.

In this sense many aspects of the military's knowledge have been branded as epistemically problematic, specifically objectivity (Danielsson 2022, p.317). Thus, with great relevance to this essay it has been argued that for the military to become more reflexive in their approach they should rethink their interactions with those who are subject to military operations (Danielsson 2022, p.327). The military's epistemology is grounded in detached rational decision making which is associated with masculinity (Hansen 2014) and directly contradicts how feminine knowledge which represents experience is considered 'impulsive, uncontrolled and emotional' (Cohn 1993, p.231). The distinction between supposedly feminine (emotional, irrational) and masculine (detached, rational) forms of depiction and knowledge gives important foundation to this essay. This research intends to reconcile this gendered approach with an understanding of the limitations of civilian harm mitigation and reporting at an epistemological level. Focusing on how the military allows suffering to take place through the ways in which they construct it and the knowledge which informs this.

### **Knowledge and gender in understanding suffering**

This research is based on the assumption that reality is socially constructed, this is important because the civilian harm reports are an intersection where civilian harm is contested between different discourses both attempting to construct reality. The reality of the US military's strategic and institutional practices is reflected within their report writing on one hand, and the reality of local populations' experience is supported by civil society on the other.

This research follows the argument that some within the social constructivist school follow that there is no reality to be uncovered, it is just a case of competing discourses (Hansen 2014). By making this claim it is not denying that suffering took place, but is addressing how denial of the suffering has been able to take place. In this specific case how, the US military has been able to rationalise the killing of civilians whereas the experience of local people is undermined. In this sense, reality is constructed from different knowledge perspectives, for different goals:

Critical peace and conflict studies have drawn attention to this construction of 'truths' and have shown how different frames and interpretations may lead to competing problematizations of violent conflict (Julian et al 2019, p.210).

These competing problematizations of violent conflict are represented by the civilian harm mitigation and reporting mechanisms.

The main way this construction takes place, following the argument of this essay is through language and framing. There is a large amount of literature which highlights the importance of language because it shapes: 'what can and cannot be seen, and thus what can and cannot be thought, said and done' (Friis 2015 p.731). This is illustrated in other research which has highlighted the importance of language in relation to this research puzzle, in its importance to perception and cognition (Morris 2005), its association to gender (Cohn 1987) and its importance in the construction of gender (Butler 1999). But also, in its importance in constructing security through language which securitizes (Buzan & Wilde 1998), and its importance in constructing terrorism and the response to this post 9/11(Jackson 2005a). In reference to civilian harm mitigation and reporting, the language within reports are 'technologies representing human deaths and lives, violence and war, tragedy and redress' (Wilke 2021 p.2). In this sense, this research will address

how language is used within the reports to frame the construction of suffering in a way which makes it permissible.

### **Knowledge basis**

This literature review will now address what knowledge informs this construction of reality in the context of civilian harm mitigation and reporting. It is important to examine where knowledge comes from and the reasons why certain forms of knowledge are privileged to make this construction possible. As already addressed the literature pointed to how a gendered understanding of knowledge is important to this puzzle.

Literature has explored how the military should be more reflexive in their juncture between being an observer and a producer of knowledge, and the reality constructions of people subject to military operations (Danielsson 2022). The civilian harm mitigation and reporting files represent a key tool in understanding this juncture, due to the fact the US military investigates the claims of civilian harm to represent their own version of the intersection of these two knowledge sources within the reports.

Specifically, the US military bases the majority of their knowledge within the civilian casualty reports through 'high-end visual technology' (Wilke 2021, p.10). They observe and make judgements purely from their view in the air (Ford & Richardson 2023), regardless of the literature which addresses how the technology gives limited detail (Kolanoski 2017). This form of knowledge is something that the US have access to due to their resources and the nature of their intervention using drone technology. Relying solely on this form of knowledge means other actors

are restricted in their ability to compete with similar knowledge sources because they do not have access to this technology.

Furthermore, this form of knowledge has been celebrated as being objective and unemotional, which is seen to be a strength. The literature suggests that the further removed from battle, the more variance exists between emotions and interpretation of the situation (Zilincik 2022). It is likely that this distance means human feelings are unlikely to be shared (Allison 2015). This argument is reinforced by the fact that drone technology has been celebrated as 'removing the emotional element' from war, with some AI experts hoping no human emotion will be involved in the process in the future (Payne 2018). This illustrates that the US military prioritises unemotional and observation led forms of knowledge which other actors are unlikely to be able to provide.

On the other hand, the local populations who are impacted by the intervention of the US military, those who civil society are fighting for, base their knowledge on the epistemology of experience. Airwars, a key NGO who represent local populations pick up on the different channels of communication and information from the situation on the ground (Ford & Richardson 2023, p.3). This clearly contradicts the US militaries view from the air.

The knowledge of local people is informed by their lived experience of violence (Julian et al 2019, p.211). This is illustrated convincingly by Sjoberg: '— including bodily harm, bodily humiliation, and body killing—relies on felt pain, felt despair, and felt humiliation' (2016, p.6). There is a clear gap between the understanding of the observable of the US military and the felt that Sjoberg (2016) is referring to. In the context of the US-led coalition in Iraq and Syria Azmat

Khan, an advocate for civilian harm, represents this distinction between the military's story and that of the local populations which draws attention to the emotional experiences of the people involved (Khan 2021b). It is clear that this epistemology of emotion and experience contradicts the US military's rejection of emotion and reliance on the observable.

The importance of rebalancing power through accepting this form of knowledge has been addressed within the literature (Julian et al 2019). However, what is clear is that militarism is an ideology disconnected from key elements of experience namely the embodied self and everyday lives (Dyvik & Greenwood 2016). The disconnect between these two epistemologies is a key drawback for civilian harm mitigation and reporting to be an effective tool to bring about change which has been unexplored within the literature. This research wishes to address this by focusing on what knowledge informs the military's judgements within their reporting.

### **Knowledge as gendered**

When investigating experience and emotion and its place within epistemology the literature points towards the importance of gender and gendered discourse. First in regard to how feminine forms of knowledge associated with irrationality such as experience are not valued, compared to masculine forms. In the second instance in the sense that suffering and vulnerability itself is considered to be feminine and therefore not given space in the discourse.

Before exploring the importance of gendered discourses to the theoretical standpoint of this research, it is important to note that this argument rejects essentialism. Essentialists argue that



being a woman or man based on your biology makes you a certain way in terms of emotion, interests and intellect (Peterson 2014). Instead, it follows the argument that gender is socially and politically constructed which has extensive literature such as in Butler (1999) and Hansen (2014). It is thus not arguing that men are more aggressive and women more peace-loving but these gendered associations with biological sex are constructed (Cohn 1993, p.228). This is important to note in this context because the majority of this research is referring to the military as an institution which is considered masculine (Baaz & Stern 2008; Cockburn 2013; Ammendola et al 2016).

Although there is a vast amount of literature on the difference in suffering and insecurity experiences by women from men (Sjoberg 2016) and the special provision needed to be given to protect women (Cockburn 2013, p.441). It is not the intention of this research to explore these gendered differences during conflict. That is because this research is addressing the puzzle that gendered perspectives on knowledge and suffering are leading to restrictions in this mechanism for being effective. From this perspective concepts of feminine knowledge and suffering being feminine need to be addressed to prevent these from allowing any suffering to take place.

This research leans heavily on the work of Cohn who convincingly illustrates the argument that specific characteristics within society are dichotomised, and based on association with either the feminine or masculine (1993, p.229), this has basis in wider feminist theories (Jay 1981). These masculinities and femininities are produced as complementary and hierarchical (Cockburn 2013, p. 435).

Most importantly in the context of knowledge thus far addressed in this literature review masculine knowledge is that which is considered rational, objective and logical whereas the female side is considered impulsive, uncontrolled and emotional (Cohn 1993, p.230). Therefore, the first way that gender impacts the knowledge which informs civilian harm reporting is in the sense that military knowledge is considered to be rational, logical and objective. On the other hand, more narrative, hermeneutic and contextual forms of knowledge are constituted as feminine and inferior (Hansen 2014, p.22). This gendered approach to understanding knowledge must be applied to the civilian harm mitigation and reporting mechanisms because these gender associations can be made to the reliance of the military on observable and tech-based knowledge, compared to civil society relying upon local knowledge based on experience. Therefore, the rejection of local knowledge by the military should be analysed from this gendered perspective.

A second way that the knowledge perspective of civilian harm mitigation and reporting needs to be addressed from a gendered perspective is because the knowledge of the local people is considered private as it takes place at the site of the body within people's homes and lives. On the other hand, that of the military is considered public. In this sense the construction of reality as the knowledge basis of the subject is marginalised by state-centric understandings of international relations (Hansen 2014). The literature points to this in the fact that state knowledge is inherently considered masculine- it is regarded once again as rational whereas the epistemology of experience is considered feminine- and irrational. This links to more classical theories on gender in which campaigning was to make the 'personal' 'political', where private lives of families were considered outside of the sphere of politics when this clearly was not the case (Hansen 2014, p.23). In this

sense, the experiences of those people affected by the US airstrikes are not being considered as a sound knowledge basis.

What is clear is that emotion is important to the construction of reality for local populations but likely to be rejected due to its associated with femininity thus far exemplified in the literature. The literature highlights that emotion is key to the construction of reality however that different 'emotions' are dealt with differently within security studies, namely fear and hate are considered the most relevant (Crawford 2000), specifically in their association with nationalism (Butler 2004). This represents how although analysis of emotion is untheorized (Bleiker & Hutchison 2008), some emotions are given more space within the knowledge circles which inform decision making such as the military or policy makers in general. In terms of the civilian casualty reports this research wishes to examine the role emotion plays within the construction of suffering, therefore what emotion informs military decisions and reflection about actions which caused harm, how emotion informs experience from those who suffer at the hands of the US military, and how these emotions are dealt with within the discourse of reporting.

In the context of Crawford's article, and the acceptance that different emotions are dealt with differently (2000), Cohn explains how the different treatment of emotion is based on whether the emotions themselves are associated with masculinity or femininity (1993). Cohn, unlike Crawford (2000), associates the word emotion itself with women and argues that aggression and pride are not considered to be emotions at all (1993). For example, pride has been celebrated in its link to nationalism (Ross 2013, p.275). Cohn's approach is convincing in explaining why the

aforementioned emotions of fear and hate are considered within security studies because these are associated with masculinity and are therefore not considered emotions at all (1993).

### **Suffering as gendered**

The second key way that a gendered approach is essential to understanding civilian casualty and mitigation is in its relevance when understanding suffering. This is important in two respects, first the space of suffering is at the point of the body which is related to the private and linked to the feminine (Hansen 2014; Sjoberg 2016). This raises questions about how the military can understand the suffering of civilians from the distanced and observable nature of their knowledge basis.

In illustrating how the perceived 'toughness of military action' creates a distance between the military's understanding of experience and emotion (Pain 2015), this links back to the understanding of military epistemics' basis of ideology of force which directly opposed that of human security. There is thus a vast lack of understanding between the hypermasculinity of military action and the neglected spaces of the intimate- body, the emotions and the psyche (Pain 2015 p.66). In this sense the construction of the military as masculine and tough prevents an understanding of those who are at the receiving end of suffering during conflict. This suggests that the fact that the military are investigating their own conduct during conflict will limit their ability to fully see the suffering they caused.

The second reason a gendered approach is essential to understanding suffering and its construction within the civilian harm is based on an association of femininity with the 'attention to and care for living, dying and suffering' (Cohn 1993, p.235). Here the 'care for' can be linked to the logic of war in which militaries cannot empathise with the experience (Pain 2015). The connection is thus being made that the inability for militaries to empathise is based on empathy being an emotion associated with femininity, which this literature review has thus far exemplified the military do not relate to. Furthermore, the epistemology of military advantage which will be addressed in part two of this literature review means that there is no room to care for suffering when trying to 'win' wars from the perspective of the military.

The rejection of the feminine side of discourse means 'any words that express an emotional awareness of the desperate human reality behind the sanitised abstractions of death and destruction cannot be spoken' (Cohn 1993, pp. 231-232). Therefore, it is not just that suffering cannot be seen due to the distance of occupation, and the distance between observed and felt, but it is not allowed to be spoken about. This approach to the construction of the discourse suggests that there is 'no room to imagine a seven-year-old boy with flesh melting away from his bones' (1993, p. 232). What is key is without representing suffering within the discourse, due to the social constructivist nature of reality, the word choice distorts 'the process required to think about warfare' (1993, p.231). This argument is key to the foundation of this research as the civilian harm reports illustrate how the military represent suffering within their internal discourses.

This inability to see suffering should be considered in line with the argument made by Butler that appealing to a recognition of collective vulnerability inherent to all human life will

foster empathy (Butler 2004, p.20). From Butler's perspective the fact that we are all vulnerable to suffering and have all lost someone, should be a precursor to look after one another (2004). Butler recognises, unlike Cohn (1993), that some suffering is seen and addressed within emotion in discourse when others are not, highlighting the importance of nationalistic and racial hierarchies of value of life (2004). In the context of a gendered approach however it is worth asking whether the vulnerability that Butler (2004) is referring to fits the framework of gendered dichotomy raised by Cohn (1993). Thus, not all vulnerabilities are considered equal due to racial and gendered dichotomies, this challenges Butler's concept of 'collective vulnerability' (2004) to a large extent. What's more the concept of vulnerability is associated with femininity in of itself (Pain 2015). This in turn is associated with weakness and dependency (Cunniff Gilson 2016). The literature highlighting these associations is important to consider when addressing how the military deals with suffering. This illustrates how this research should consider if those who suffer due to civilian harm are associated with femininity and in turn, does this lead to the civilians losing their agency? Butler does accept that this association is a limitation of the concept of vulnerability and addresses that what is needed is to practise seeing vulnerability without eradicating agency (Butler 2004, p.42).

Although Butler does not address language which constructs suffering in the way Cohn (1993) does, she addresses the contradiction between the obituaries of those who have died in 9/11, compared to those who died from military occupation who seldom have names, faces or histories (2004, p.32). Civil society also makes this case for public recognition which considers those who die at the hands of the US military as: 'names not numbers' (CIVIC & PAX 2021). Friis makes a similar argument in the context of Operation Inherent Resolve (OIR) by illustrating the amount of

attention given to those who suffered at the hands of ISIS in regard to the beheading videos (2015). This is key to this research because, in line with Butler (2004), it highlights how some suffering is allowed to be visible, and shows emotions towards suffering is possible, but highlights key arguments about race that prevent this from being the case. In reality 'An innocent blown up by an ill-aimed drone strike is just as much a victim as someone brutally beheaded by the Islamic State' (Walt 2015), however the key arguments made by Butler and Friis is the way meaning is ascribed to certain lives and violence acts for political goals. The visibility of the ISIS beheadings and 9/11 caused emotions such as anger and empathy which cannot be felt with the blatant lack of attention given to the harm civilians are suffering. By understanding which lives and how lives are constructed, this research can explore what aspects of the discourse allow suffering to be constructed unequally.

Although it is worth noting the important racial element to the construction of the 'other' within the nationalistic War On Terror (WOT) discourses which Butler addresses (2004) along with many others, such as Jackson's addition regarding the construction of 'good Americans' and the alien, parasitic and barbaric terrorists (2005b, p.154). This has led to a 'join us or be against us mentality' (Newman & Levine 2006, p23). Drone warfare is said to further foster this racial distinction (Allinson 2015, p.114). In this sense there is a pre-existing feeling which differs from one that is characterised by an:

empathetic understanding with the other, may help actors frame ambiguous behaviour as neutral, positive, or motivated by circumstances rather than hostile intentions (Crawford 2000, p.134).

In this sense, understanding the suffering that all humans can experience should bring humanity together to prevent harm and celebrate all human lives. It is clear that constructions of race and gender create difficulty in constructing and understanding the 'other' in relation to self which hinders the ability to understand experience and suffering.

One key way that the other is constructed in a way which prevents empathy highlighted within the literature is through dehumanisation (Utych 2018, p.442). The concept of humanisation draws on Butler's work to a large extent in which her concept of mutual vulnerability is based on the fact that we are all human and therefore we can recognise the vulnerability in each other (2004). Thus, when humans are dehumanised empathy is not possible. Utych found that dehumanising immigrants by portraying them as a virus or disease leads to more negative attitudes toward immigrants and more restrictive policy preference (2018, p.448), or Dykstra who explored how refugees were often constructed with language related to the movement of water which suggested destructive tendencies (2016, p.39). In many instances' dehumanisation can be applied to how terrorists have been constructed as animals without compassion, tolerance and mercy (Jackson 2005b, p.151). This has led to mistreatment of prisoners, where they are expelled from:

our shared understanding of what it means to be human, so as to permit, if not necessitate, physical and mental treatment (albeit in the context of interrogation) abhorrent to human beings (Ahmad 2009, p.1687).

This inability to see and understand the suffering of the other accumulates in the argument that drone warfare should be celebrated for its 'precision' and for being 'humane' because the killing of US military persons is prevented (Khan 2021). When, this is blatantly not the case, if these are precise and humane wars does that make the civilians who die not human? The lack of



understanding for the lives and suffering of the people living in Syria and Iraq means the civilians are sacrifices (Khan 2021). What's clear needs to be explored is how the discourse allows this to take place.

### **Humanising the Civilian within the Laws of Armed Conflict**

This literature review will finally address how this discourse is entrenched within the Laws of Armed Conflict (LOAC). The militarised response to terrorism has bypassed and created new laws and precedent since 9/11 (Downes 2004), creating a concrete and therefore unchallenged knowledge basis for the military which enshrined the aforementioned discourse. Especially as the WOT has reached 20 years the broader foundations of these entrenched discourses are often forgotten and overlooked. These:

Legal frameworks do not do justice to passion, and grief and rage all of which tear us from ourselves, bind us to others, transport us, undo us, implicate us in lives that are not our own, irreversibly if not fatally (Butler 2004, p.25).

This lack of emotion helps manipulate the discourse to facilitate suffering (Smith 2021). Civil society is thus not only battling the inability for suffering to be seen, understood and represented but this is entrenched in legal doctrine, giving them little scope for real change. Because civilian harm is justified along the LOAC there is no room for it to be treated like other atrocities, this is illustrated by Crawford who raises the value of truth commissions which have taken place for example in post-apartheid South Africa in which the recognition of pain, acknowledgement of wrongdoing and truth, to foster forgiveness and empathy (2000, p.152).

It is therefore important to understand whether civilian harm mitigation and reporting may in fact confirm this artificially constructed discourse and therefore not help civil society's demands for improved human security. In this sense the legal framework has been tactically implemented to support the goals of the US military instead as a means for restraint (Newman & Levine 2006). This manipulation of discourse has been evident, argued by Friis in the sense that the use of ISIS beheading videos turned a humanitarian nightmare into an imminent security threat (2015, p.734). These arguments suggest the construction or lack of construction of suffering are implemented tactically within the official discourses, albeit intentionally or not.

The LOAC can split into three arenas, distinction, intention, proportionality and necessity. Assessing this as a basis to military epistemology is problematic because it doesn't matter who is killed or how they are killed as long as it meets these criteria, making the case that these regulations are in fact useless (Smith 2021).

Distinction is one of the main elements of LOAC, this is an attempt to ensure civilians are separated from the enemy, and the condition in which the LOAC were primarily introduced (Sangroula 2010). However, a large amount of literature has highlighted the grey area of what counts as a civilian or non-combatant which has a large amount of attention within the literature (Zehfuss 2012). By definition, the civilian is inherently ambiguous and many argue it is politically charged (Wills 2009). This naturally creates epistemological problems for the US military and for civil societies ability to stand up for civilians, in the context of Operation Inherent Resolve (OIR) it is argued geographic space makes you complicit, harbouring and being involved within the economy (Gregory 2006). Furthermore, the attention paid to 'ISIS cubs' (Vale 2018) and 'ISIS

brides' (Jackson 2022) meant within the narrative women and children's innocence has been questioned. Furthermore, during the siege of Mosul, at the height of OIR, civilians were instructed not to leave which coincided with a spike in civilian casualties (Amnesty International Press Release 2017). All in all, these grey areas make LOAC based on distinction of civilian and combatant moot.

In terms of intention, intentionally targeting civilians is not allowed under the LOAC (Graham 2018), thus in this regard any harm is considered an 'accident'. However, what is clear is that suffering caused during conflict however, does not change depending on the intent of the aggressor. This is supported within surrounding literature (Torres 2021). Walzer, a key proponent of Just War, accepts intent does not change suffering but addresses the challenge of balancing national interest and humanitarianism (Walzer 1992) which further highlights the epistemological issues with civilian harm mitigation.

Necessity and proportionality have also been deeply criticised as they are based on the fact that intentional harm can take place as long as 'the expected harm to civilians is excessive in relation to the anticipated military advantage' (Katz 2021). The main issue with this is: how do you value human life in terms of military advantage? (Lewis & Stephen 2005, p.64). In terms of the epistemological foundations this is possible because what makes a life human, or considered human, is the emotional element which is removed. If the human element of emotion, experience and suffering is removed then it is easy to class civilian harm as simply 'collateral damage'. Zehfuss (2012) makes the convincing case that the litmus test for these elements of the LOAC is understanding what the military gained, however a large amount of literature has pointed to that

fact that the military advantages during drone warfare are very hard to prove (Carvin 2012; Greenfield & Hausheer 2014; Finegan 2018). Again, the construction of suffering within this is important because the details of the suffering are intentionally left out to further prevent the inconsistency between success and suffering being realised. What's more due to the OIR not being a publicly visible conflict (Friis 2015) democratic backlash does not exist to demand further accountability of military methods.

### **Looking forward**

From a social constructivist perspective, seeking to rebalance the power by including experiential knowledge in the construction of reality about conflict (Julian et al 2019) it is the hope that civilian harm could be mitigated. However, the assumption is that an epistemological change needs to take place before the fight for human security can have genuine impact. This makes literature focused on specific areas of civilian harm mitigation and reporting such as those that address the weaknesses in the reporting mechanisms (Bijl 2022) and the shortfalls of the process in claiming payments (Amanda & Schulzke 2013) ineffective. This literature remains relevant as it shows the difficulty in supporting local populations affected by airstrikes. However, what is needed is a deeper analysis of the epistemological basis of the US military's understanding and construction of suffering to address how limited genuine change takes place in the prevention of harm.

## **Chapter III**

### **Methodology**

This research aims to analyse how the military constructs suffering in a way which allows civilian harm to take place. This aim will be met by adopting discourse analysis of military reporting techniques, based on the assumption that reality is socially constructed, and thus:

'since language is one of the chief mechanisms by which our sense of reality is negotiated, the way language opens up or closes off various reality-productions deserves close attention' (Bazerman 1990, p.78)

The term 'discourse' in the context of this research will refer to the language choice which reproduces an observed event, represented in the form of military report writing. This definition draws upon Fairclough's synergy of language analysis and social theory (1992). In this sense, the analysis of language must be considered in the wider social context. These reports are predominantly used internally with the sole intention of recalling events to serve as a feedback mechanism in an attempt to create methods for accountability. The discourse within military reports is therefore essential because the institutional context of military practice as well as the experience of local people is brought together to reproduce one reality by those directly involved in the event. Thus, a clear representation of a complex social context.

To understand discourse as a social practice means accepting that discourse represents an interaction between speaker/writer and listener/reader (Fairclough 1992, p.3). Discourse analysis has been used widely in understanding the construction of suffering with a public audience and the impact this has on opinion (Boucher 2009; Figenschou 2011; Dykstra 2016). From this

perspective, the audience as a *spectator* of violence is widely addressed in the literature (Figenschou 2011). Still, there is little to address how the construction of suffering is produced and consumed by the purveyor of violence which this research aims to address.

This research will begin to fill this gap by analysing 40 of the 219 credible military reports in which the US- military accepts that their involvement caused a level of harm during Operation Inherent Resolve. 1300 reports in total were made public due to a freedom of information request (FOI) made by the New York Times in 2017 (Khan et al 2021). These contain details on the location, target, reason for the strike, strike process, reason for considering civilian casualty and details on reporting, thus representing each military-led investigation into the US-led airstrikes which may have caused harm. A large number of the reports are based on local reporting by Airwars, therefore there is a direct link between the reports and local knowledge. Some of the reports directly quote Airwars reporting and some only refer to the Airwars reports in brief. Due to restriction of time and resources a reconciliation with the Airwars reports could not be made, this however leaves space for fruitful further research.

For the purpose of analytical depth, this research will focus analysis on the way suffering is constructed within these reports because 'word choice itself can provide different cognitive influences on decision making' (Utych 2018, p.441). Therefore, the word choice used to construct suffering impacts the military's understanding of the harm they caused. In this sense the US military, who are the main audience of the military reports are not merely spectating or observing suffering, they play a role in causing the suffering taking place, thus they produce and reproduce the ideology of violence. It is paramount to civil societies' struggle for human security that the

military are appropriately constructing suffering within these military reports based on this essay's argument.

## Data collection and analysis

The data will be drawn from 40 reports which will be chosen between the time frame of the campaign of March 2015 to Nov 2017 when reporting took place. One report will be chosen for each month of the campaign. During the most intense bombing from March 2017- October 2017 two reports will be analysed for each of these months for increased analytical scope (see Figure 1.). The reports will be chosen with random generator software to avoid selection bias, which will choose alternative reports between Iraq and Syria. Thus, the reports will be evenly split as there are no suggestions of differing tactics between the two countries (Ohlers 2017).

### Reported civilian deaths from US-led Coalition strikes in Iraq and Syria

Due to large variations in the quality of reporting, Airwars provisionally grades allegations of civilian harm using a standardised methodology across all belligerents and conflicts. The five categories are explained in full on our Methodology page. Individual events are recorded in the Civilian Casualties pages.

English العربية

CHART LEGEND:  
Confirmed  
Fair  
Weak  
Contested  
Discounted

VIEW THIS CHART AS:  
Stacked Multiples  
Best for comparing totals over time

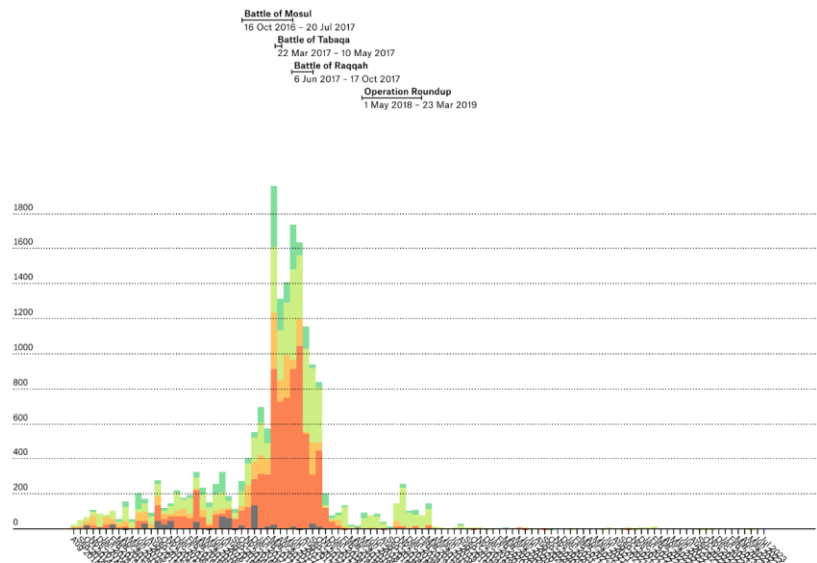


Figure 1. Reported civilian deaths from US-led Coalition strikes in Iraq and Syria (Airwars 2023b)

It will therefore be representative of the whole campaign spanning the time frame with a large enough sample to observe patterns but also allow in-depth analysis. This research accepts that there may be some variation in reporting over this time frame due to the frequency of airstrikes and the change in leadership from the President Obama administration to the President Trump administration. However, as the focus of the research is the military as an institution, it is predicted to exhibit the same patterns throughout the campaign. The research will, however, reflect any significant findings within the analysis.

Three main data points will be the focus; humanisation, the construction of suffering, and the interaction with local knowledge, as these build the basis for the construction of suffering as a whole as discussed in the literature review. The data was coded according to statements in relation to these three categories (see Appendix A). Throughout the analysis will reference the corresponding military reporting using Airwars naming codes illustrated like CI079 2015 which would represent coalition strike, Iraq number 79 in 2015. Similarly, CS094 2015 which would represent coalition strike, Syria number 94 in 2015.

The first data point will focus around dehumanisation because how human beings are framed in the reporting language 'delimits what or who can appear as the victim of violence, rightfully entitled to protection from (state-sanctioned) violence' (Mills 2015, p.47). Dehumanisation can be understood as referring to human beings while removing human characteristics (Christoff 2014). It is also a signifier for the prevention of empathy that it leads to in the audience (Utych 2018). This is therefore a precursor to the construction of suffering. This is well explained by Utych who paraphrases Haslam (2006):



therefore denies out-groups traits that are uniquely human—things such as the ability to reason, think critically, or feel emotions that are typically thought of as what separates human beings from other living organisms (Utych 2018, p.440).

In regard to the military reports, analysis will examine dehumanisation in the sense of the language that the military uses to address the human beings they are observing. For example, it will observe whether animalistic or mechanistic characteristics are used to describe people. As the violence is carried out from the air, and the military observes the battlefield from a screen, humanisation was considered to be an important element to distinguish human bodies from the environment, especially as the literature suggested the quality of technology hindered levels of identification (Kolanski 2017). This language would therefore be a precursor for whether the bodies are deserving of suffering.

The second data point of the construction of suffering is interlinked because when someone is humanised 'principles of humanity and the minimising of suffering are commanding motivations' (Camins 2020, p.128). In this regard, how the US military describes, explains and therefore constructs suffering within the specific reports will be the focus. As the construction of suffering is the crux of this essay, analysis will focus upon what is and what isn't said about the suffering which each report is attempting to address. Signifiers of this will be description of the bodies being viewed in relation to the impact of the corresponding airstrikes. It is likely that due to assumptions that the construction of suffering will not be adequately addressed then inference will have to be made based on information after the airstrikes have taken place. As mentioned, the majority of similar research is conducted on discourse for public audiences. What a large amount of this research has noted is how suffering is constructed as something far away from the reader/witness

but that if it was constructed as something closer it 'may engender strong feelings of compassion' (Figenschou 2011, p.3). Thus, analysis will consider the impact of distance throughout.

The third point of analysis will be whether the reports draw upon local knowledge for their investigations. This will be essential to understanding the epistemological basis for the military's conclusion on what harm has been constructed to have taken place. As addressed within the literature review it is predicted that the US military are not likely to draw on local sources of knowledge as they prioritise state-centric understandings of knowledge (Hansen 2014). However, every report states whether it was self-reported, if it relied on reporting external to the US military, or a mixture of both. In the first instance the US military is aware through their procedure of whether civilian harm was caused due to their visual observations and chain of command. In the second case the US military has drawn on alternative sources of information. In these instances, the majority of the time Airwars are referred to as the source. This is because Airwars collates the local reporting and other sources around the incident (Ford & Richardson 2023). Analysis will focus on the interaction of the US military with the knowledge from local sources to understand how this informs their epistemology.

## **Limitations**

Discourse analysis has been criticised for a lack of common understanding on the best way to study discourse (Milliken 1999). This is reflective of the various interpretations of discourse itself and the subjectivities within a post-positive ontology. Therefore, one method of studying a particular discourse in a particular context is hard to apply to an alternative situation. However, it is clear

that a gap exists in analysing the discourse of military reporting and the impact this has on military practice itself, thus deconstructing the discourse through analysis is an important way of exploring the impact linguistic decisions may have on decision making while remaining self-aware of other explanations. To strengthen the research therefore it would always be fruitful to analyse other similar discourses in other settings and during different time periods (Doty 1993).

An initial limitation with the dataset being military reports is essential to this essay's contextual argument that civil society and the military's ontology is fundamentally different. In this case these reports serve as a reporting mechanism for the institution of the military and therefore they are written practically and in a self-serving manner. In analysis of similar reporting mechanisms such as within the police, technical and formal language is used to provide all the necessary details to the investigative process (Ćetković 2017, p.160). From this perspective there is a consensus that knowledge needs to be understood from a positivist approach in which data is quantifiable and systemised to meet organisational needs (Julian et al 2019).

Some data is heavily redacted and complicated acronymized language is used on the basis of operational need. Therefore, the analysis needs to make assumptions about missing data and take into consideration that the reports are designed to be practical. This is useful to this research puzzle as analysing what is considered important and therefore written and what is unimportant and not written is key to understanding the construction of suffering. However, it also acts as a rebuttal by institutions against reforming their use of language and construction on the basis of practicalities. What is overlooked is the impact this organisational discourse has on reproducing

violence which this research wishes to highlight. This research is in agreeance with Jaggar who argue the backlash to alternative forms of knowledge:

functions, obviously, to bolster the epistemic authority of the currently dominant groups, composed largely of white men, and to discredit the observations and claims of the currently subordinate groups including, of course, the observations and claims of many people of color and women (Jaggar 1989, pp.164-165).

Further research into the 1081 non-credible reports in which the denial of accountability has taken place would be useful, but not possible with restrictions of time and word count. This denial is namely based on insufficient evidence, or the coalition claiming to have not conducted any airstrikes in the vicinity of the claim. This would add to this research by illustrating on what premise the US military interacted and disregarded local knowledge to conclude that no harm could have taken place.

## **Chapter IV**

### **Dehumanisation**

This research set out to understand how suffering is constructed in a way that allows civilian harm to take place. The literature pointed to the fact that when someone is dehumanised this is a precursor for suffering to be justified (Michel 2022). Importantly, this prevents empathy because on a fundamental level, empathy is recognising others as human beings (Head 2016, p.102). Therefore, deductively this research analysed the ways in which dehumanisation takes place within the data, to contribute to an understanding of how the suffering can not only exist but be justified upon these bodies within these incidents of harm.

Although no singular dehumanisation hypothesis exists (Vaes et al 2020), this research found that the dehumanisation within these reports is different to the other frequently cited examples such as at Guantanamo (Ahmad 2009), Abu Ghraib (Spens 2014), in Bosnia (Rorty 1993) or when discussing immigrants (Utych 2018). These examples of dehumanisation rely on a close and intimate understanding of the bodies, which leads to the removal of human qualities (Haslam 2006). Instead, due to the distance of aerial warfare and surveillance the explicit manipulation of these characteristics is not evident because from the drones the bodies have no qualities and characteristics by nature of the distance. The dehumanisation thus can be regarded as less intimate in the sense that the military personnel within the incidents do not do this manipulation of characteristics themselves.

Instead, in the case of this research bodies need to be distinguished from the enemy to be humanised, importantly dehumanisation of the enemy has already taken place previously to the incidents, through military and national discourses. This may be subconscious, as dehumanisation of the enemy is a normal part of discourse and tactics (Bruneau & Kteily 2017). This is exacerbated by the international discourse since 9/11, in which any representation of terrorism is constructed as inhuman, one that can only be dealt with by being destroyed (Allinson 2015). Thus, suffering upon the enemy is constructed as justified using the tools of dehumanisation. This sentiment has worsened with the rise of ISIS who have been regarded as a barbaric terrorist group (Rech 2021).

What is essential, and is covered in literature, is how this is also based upon racial and cultural distinction, in which the oriental 'other' is considered barbaric and dangerous (Jackson 2005a). This has manifested in the treatment of all Muslims' as the 'suspect community' (Hillyard, 1993). These create predefined assumptions which exist to the military previous to the reports and therefore are not explicitly evident. This predefined dehumanisation, coupled with the uncertainty about which bodies were the enemy due to the distance of the viewer meant dehumanisation could take place upon any body.

On this basis, analysis found two key forms of dehumanisation, first the closer the bodies were observed in proximity to the enemy the more they were dehumanised. This was done by explicit suggestions of their involvement within combat, judgments made based on gender and inconsistencies between classifications of bodies. In the second sense uncertainty existed around whether human beings were present in the environment at all. In this case dehumanising language heightened this uncertainty rendering human lives invisible.

The type of humanisation within the reports was one which was impacted by the distance of the aerial war, in the sense that uncertainty precluded all knowledge about the human beings being observed. This uncertainty was based on the fact that the US military based their knowledge predominantly on the observable. However, the quality of observable information was limited by the clarity of the technology (Kolanoski 2017) and the fact that the military could only see part of the picture from the air (Ford & Richardson 2023). Thus, the uncertainty of knowledge allowed any suffering to be justified on the basis that the bodies could be deserving of it.

One telling sign of the uncertainty which existed was the inconsistencies around how the body was represented throughout the data. This was important because the degree of humanisation determines whether suffering is justified, it is therefore paramount that clarity exists to make this distinction. 22 different ways of referring to a human body are represented within the data set. Within a highly illustrative example, a human body is referred to in multiple different ways: 'At (redacted), the ITC asked (redacted) did you see the *PAX* on the road in front of the TGT? (redacted) had not observed *the individual*, but on review of the feed identified *a transient person* had been present on the road' (CI826) (emphasis added). In this example the terms 'PAX', 'individual' and 'transient person' are all used to refer to the same human body. What does this inconsistency mean for the reader's understanding of this body? Not only does this go against the argument that institutional reporting should be consistent and precise (Ćetković 2017). The body moves between different levels of classification which makes the reader question whether they are more or less deserving of suffering on the basis of dehumanisation.

## **Classification of human bodies**

This section is going to address how humans are classified on the basis that they need to be distinguished from the enemy to be humanised. Although humanisation was done explicitly with the use of the term 'noncombatant' it was also done in implicit ways with reference to age and gender.

The classification centred around whether the body is a combatant or not was anticipated, as the distinction of civilian is the basic premise of the LOAC (Laws of Armed Conflict) (Kolanoski, M. 2017, p.380). Accordingly, if the US-led coalition is seen to be targeting civilians then they are breaching these laws. This essay has illustrated how dehumanisation is important to construct this distinction.

However, only 6 cases use the term 'noncombatant' and there is little detail on the observations which make this explicit determination. The vague and meaningless statement is used in the two reports 'All personnel are assumed to be non-combatants unless they are positively identified as valid military targets' (CI266 2016; CI422 2017) which gives no detail of the difference in positive identifications. This directly contradicts the statement: 'There is not enough information presented to definitively determine the status (civilian/enemy combatant)' (CS237 2016). It is thus unclear how the civilian is separated from the enemy combatant.

This civilian/enemy combatant classification is further complicated in the instances where bodies are considered to be working with ISIS. First, in one incident the target is miscategorised



as a weapons factory which turns out to be a cotton gin. Within the report it suggests that because 75% of the cotton industry is run by ISIS the suffering of these civilians can be justified (CS383 2016). Similarly, in another incident, according to local sources, 'Hajji al Jaabri had been forcefully conscripted by Daesh to dig tunnels' (CS118 2015). In the third example the military fired warning shots at the civilian drivers of oil tankers the judgement was made that 'direct military advantage for engaging oil tanker trucks was not excessive when 1 civilian was killed or injured per truck:' (CS398 2016). These are direct examples of the intertwined nature of ISIS within the economy which was suggested within the literature (Gregory 2006 p.635; Zehfuss 2012 p.6). In this sense non-enemy are dehumanised as the enemy. If the possibility exists that all bodies could be involved in ISIS then they do not need to care about preventing suffering upon those dehumanised bodies.

### **Gendered human bodies**

A less explicit classification is used to signify the relation of the body to the combatant in terms of gender, this is through distinction of Adult male or ADM. Significantly, this data node of adult male is coded 16 times compared to the noncombatant of 6. It could be argued that this high frequency of coding for adult male may be due to cultural practices, in which it is more likely that women reside inside of the house. However, what is concerning is that the military does not account for any bodies that are not directly visible. Therefore, this would suggest that the figures underestimate the amount of harm caused if women inside buildings were considered.

Significantly a strong argument can be made that this frequency of coding for adult male supports the argument that a gendered approach is considered the easiest way to distinguish

combatant from noncombatant (Kalili 2011, p.1479). This contradicts the aforementioned civilian/enemy combatant classification and instead the judgement is made that:

The individuals in the film are all adult males, and are therefore as likely to have been members of ISIS as not (CS603 2017).

This constructs the male body as equal likeliness to be enemy, thus dehumanised and therefore deserving of suffering. In this sense the military can resign themselves based on this logic that if they harm an adult male there is a possibility they have harmed the enemy. The high frequency of coding of adult male (ADM) within the data set means the US military will not see the suffering upon each of these bodies and harm is thus justified.

This finding is significant in the context of the argument made that the sanitised description by the military of suffering caused is associated with masculinity and plays down the bodily experience (Cohn 1993, p.235). In the sense that not only can masculinised institutions not see suffering but they deny its existence at the site of the male body as well.

On the other hand, the women and children are treated differently. This is evident in the following quotation: 'it is silent on the specific issue of women and children being affected by the strike' (CI505 2017). This suggests it would be worth noting if women and children suffered as if it needs to be addressed of a higher importance. This once again was expected based upon assumptions of which bodies deserve to suffer least, on the pretence that children and women represent innocent victimhood (Shocker 2018).

In one report however they carried out the strike regardless of whether children were present. 'Pre-strike ISR revealed a number of civilians (20 or more, including children) leaving the facility', the report goes on to say that 'military value of striking this target warranted a casualty threshold of (redacted)' (CS603 2017). This illustrates the US-led coalition is willing to target children if it is seen to have military value. To a degree this supports the literature which alluded to the fact that women's innocence was questioned on their role as ISIS brides (Jackson 2022) and that killing children was like 'cutting the grass before it grows' (Shocker 2018, p.41). However, it mainly just suggests that any life is expendable for military advantage. The fact that this report distinguished that children were present is interesting considering that some literature suggested it is impossible to distinguish age through a drone (Linebaugh 2013). This further illustrates the uncertainty which clouds the proximity of bodies to the enemy.

This separation on the basis of gender has been challenged within surrounding literature as perpetuating gender stereotypes (Carpenter 2005). In this sense women and children are assumed to lack the agency to partake in war and protect themselves. This is because they are considered to signify 'suffering, distress and weakness' permanently, unlike men who are associated with this only in sickness and old age (Kinsella 2006, p.183). This suggests they must be protected by men and saved by the male state (Pain 2015, p.69). What's key is that the bodies of women are a signifier of femininity and the bodies of men are a signifier of masculinity, so the distinctions based on gender reinforce these concepts of masculinity and femininity which were raised in the literature review, namely that women are helpless. What's more this distinction is considered to underpin the concept of civilian itself (Khalili 2011, p.1473). What is clear is masculinity is 'constructed in opposition to the feminised others of civilians, women and the physically weak' (Baaz & Stern

2008, p.67). In this sense the civilian is considered to be female and subhuman- outside of the political process (Gregory 2006).

These arguments illustrate a nuance to this research's argument that any body constructed as similar to the enemy is dehumanised and thus deserving of their suffering. Because this essay's argument says those closest to the enemy are dehumanised, which is most likely to be men, whereas it is clear that women are also dehumanised because they are considered to lack agency. This form of dehumanisation of women based on agency is reflected in lots of other literature where man is 'synonymous with human being' (Rorty 1993, p.114) and when objectification of women is considered a form of dehumanisation (Fredrickson & Roberts 1997). What is key is that denial of suffering upon the male body which is a key signifier of masculinity reproduces the association of suffering with femininity and lack of agency.

This research set out to address how suffering was constructed by masculine institutions informed by the argument that the sanitised descriptions made by the military of harm downplays the bodily experience of civilians and prevents suffering from being constructed. The knowledge which informs this rejects feminised forms of knowledge such as emotions and experience. This finding that suffering is denied upon the male body which is a key signifier for masculinity reproduces the association of an understanding of suffering with femininity. In turn continuing to remove the agency of feminised bodies prevents forms of knowledge associated with the feminine from informing the military's epistemological basis.

If it's clear that the US still conducts operations based on assumptions about gender such as that men they are likely to be complicit in the violence (Shocker 2018). What other assumptions on gender do they base their epistemology on? This reiterates the importance of assessing the civilian casualty files from a gendered perspective and highlights the deep epistemological issues in harm mitigation.

On three occasions the reports use the term 'victim' (CI064 2015; CS237 2016; CS768 2017), two of these were directly referencing a secondary source and therefore cannot be attributed to military choice of language alone. This is considerably low considering that each of the reports represent an incident where at least one civilian is a victim to harm. In this sense it could be assumed that in line with this essay's argument that not all of those impacted by the suffering are considered 'true' victims on the basis of dehumanisation. However, a lot is to be said considering the argument in surrounding literature that the word victim is associated with femininity (Pain 2015). Using the term victim would suggest the military are culpable for the harm.

This distinction between genders as a form of classification was further illustrated in use of the term 'Slant' to address how many people are within a building. Slant is a numerical representation of bodies represented as '12/0/13' this means 12 men, 0 women and 13 children (CS603 2017). On top of the aforementioned arguments on dehumanisation through the signifier of age and gender this can be regarded as another form of dehumanisation evident in which people are represented as numbers. Other research has addressed how representation of atrocities with large numbers is dehumanising (Harrison 2015). This research argues that reducing humans to numbers is dehumanising in itself, in the sense it removes all human characteristics. In grouping

bodies in a numerical way, the bodies cease to have faces, names or lives and therefore suffering cannot be constructed upon them.

The use of specified terminology like slant is incredibly relevant to this essay's argument about how the construction of suffering made by the military prevents understanding of the actual harm caused. This is similar to the use of 'Squirter' which means someone fleeing an airstrike seen in cases (CS383 2016; CI244 2016; CI855 2017), or 'Splash' to describe the weapons impact seen in (CI422 2017; CI620 2017; CI855 2017; CS768 2017). This use of language specifically is supported in Cohn's work which makes the argument that 'Technostrategic language allows defence intellectuals to think and act as they do' (Cohn 1987, p.690). From Cohn's perspective it's important to attribute these problems to the 'language, the words themselves- the abstractness, the euphemisms, the sanitised, friendly, sexy acronyms' (1987, p.712) which hides the true suffering which is taking place. This argument rings true with this data set and adds to an understanding of the foundations which allow suffering to take place based on these military procedures.

A key way of humanisation referenced in the literature is through the use of names, faces, personal histories, favourite hobbies, slogans so people their lives are considered lives (Butler 2004, p32). The only time the reports reference humanising details is when directly quoting secondary sources. In a quote from one local report: 'eight members of the Musa al- Habib family died when their house near the al Kanissa roundabout was struck' (CS603 2017), the use of words such as 'family' is personable and ownership through the phrase 'their house' is humanising and gives agency. Language like this allows the reader some insight into the lives of these people.

Similarly, one Airwars quote humanises through the line 'Abdul Latif Hassan al Qasab, nicknamed Latouf' added that they were trying to 'retrieve water from the river.' (CS1101 2017). Including the nickname of this victim helps the reader imagine his friends and family using this to refer to him. Although giving names and personal details to the bodies is the bare minimum in the way of humanisation this does illustrate that humanisation can exist within the reports.

### **Movement of the human body**

The final part of this analysis will address the uncertainty which surrounded whether human beings were present in the environment at all. Therefore, if dehumanising language was used which rendered the bodies invisible, then suffering could be allowed to take place on the basis that it doesn't exist. The data suggests observation of movement is essential to this classification because it suggests animate objects, which in reality can only be attributed to the presence of human beings.

First the movement of vehicles is significant because out of the 19 reports which described the movement of vehicles only four explicitly addressed that there were human bodies within them. This was evident in the use of the term 'passenger' (CS071 2015; CI122 2015), 'Operator' (CS071 2015) and 'driver' (CS171 2016). This within itself, can be considered to be dehumanising as the human beings are only addressed in relation to the vehicles. In a stand-alone case a more humanising statement is made: 'Children were passengers in her car' (CI051 2015) shows the difference of how they were children who were passengers, and it was her car not just a vehicle. This is more humanising however this paraphrases a direct email from a woman who was seeking reparations for this strike and not the military's own construction.

In the other 15 reports, no explicit mention of the fact that humans were within the vehicle such as 'a car slowing in front of the ISIL vehicle' (CI079 2015) or 'the vehicle was moving north' (CI266 2016). This research makes the argument that this is a form of dehumanisation as the people within the vehicles are stripped of their human characteristics and agency, made invisible and thus the result of their suffering bears no consequence to the military.

The implications of not referring to the people within vehicles to the construction of suffering is clear in the statement 'Prior to the missile impacting a moto came directly abreast of the targeted vehicle and received some weapons effect resulting in possible CIVCAS' (CS158 2015). In this case the impact of the strike is constructed explicitly on the vehicle alone. There is no mention of how this would have impacted the drivers and passengers of the vehicles themselves.

A similarly dehumanising move is the reference of the movement of bodies in the vicinity of buildings. Statements such as 'Civilians associated to the target facility' (CI505 2017; CI723 2017) '10 adult males, 2 children and 8 vehicles interacting with the target building' (CS474 2017). Words like association and interaction are vague, unclear and dehumanise the movements of the people. The reader is left to imagine whether they simply entered and exited the building. Maybe they are eating, sleeping, playing, hugging, cleaning, cooking: words which construct the people as humans with lives like our own. In one report detail is given: 'conducting prayer in the southeast corner of the compound' (CS383 2016). This statement gives more insight into the situation on the ground.



The final way that the human is dehumanised within the reports is through the description of how the body is moved after suffering has occurred. Words like 'loaded' are used interchangeably when referring to a human and to the movement of weapons. Evidence of this in relation to the body is:

The individual was then transported to the Tigris River, cross-loaded onto a boat, transported across the river, and then assisted into a pick-up truck (CI266 2016).

The term load suggests an inanimate object, and in other instances loaded is used interchangeably between that of moving suspected ammonium nitrate and the movement of passengers: 'white bags were loaded into vehicles' 'unloaded all remaining PAX' (CS383 2016). This case stands out because the New York Times covered a case where a man dragging an 'unknown heavy object' was actually a 'person of a small stature'- a child- who died in the strike (Khan 2021). This example illustrates the importance of clarity in language which thus far has not been evident within the reporting. This section set out to examine the ways in which the bodies were humanised throughout the reporting and has illustrated that the majority of bodies are dehumanised to a large extent.

## Chapter V

### Construction of suffering

Thus far, analysis has found that the body is dehumanised through uncertainty about the proximity to the enemy and by rendering unobservable bodies invisible. This is as a precursor for suffering to be legitimised, or constructed in a way that it does not exist. The next section is going to address how, if any, this construction of suffering takes place within the reports.

The research coded the reports based on how the military described any harm which was observed, in direct relation to the bodies viewed on the drone screen. This was mainly centred around whether the bodies were not affected, were injured or were killed. It's clear this classification served the institutional aim of reporting, and thus did not adequately address the range of suffering which may be taking place. This illustrated that it was not in the military's best interest to construct the suffering they were causing, which highlights a deep foundational drawback to improving civilian harm mitigation and reporting.

It was therefore important to consider what was not said within the data set. This meant the second main coding was around description of the weapons effect on infrastructure. This was used to infer the type of suffering which may have been taking place, to put into perspective the failure of the military's ability to account for this suffering.

This is incredibly valuable to the surrounding literature on civilian harm mitigation, as Smith argues the moral scrutiny of the killing of civilians during conflict should be of outcome

instead of method, in relation to how the argument is made that civilians are killed intentionally (2021). However, the findings of this research suggest moral scrutiny of the outcome is not possible because the outcome of these strikes are not truly constructed to account for the real suffering that is taking place. Importantly, this means that the Just War narrative is self-reinforced by this mechanism. This means that the Just War discourse is supported by the fact that suffering is downplayed within the reports. But also, Just War supports the reporting by justifying any harm that can be framed as proportional and necessary.

### **Suffering at the point of the body**

Although the codebook coded for 'description of human suffering' the detail given to human suffering is incredibly limited. This code represents a signifier of any mention of harm upon the body, but in reality, there was very little detail to adequately construct the harm which was taking place.

The key signifier of the suffering caused was judgement made on the 'disposition' of the bodies being viewed. This is evident in the statement: 'There is not enough information presented to definitely determine the status (civilian/enemy combatant), nor the final disposition (clear/wounded/killed) of the alleged victims' (CS237 2016). This research makes the argument that the disposition clear/wounded/killed is a representation of the scale of suffering caused between minimal and the maximum. It is clear that there are institutional needs for this, the military need to determine whether the body is injured or killed for their press release. It is thus obviously in the military's best interest that this remains as low as possible because of the bad press this may

cause. Although the literature pointed to the fact this was the least known war in the West (Alexander 2022), the close relationship between the US military and civil society organisations encourages them to be transparent.

However, this over simplified scale fails to accurately account for the varying levels of suffering caused. It gives nothing away for the extent of the injuries, is it a bruise? A loss of a limb? Did the civilian die instantly? How much psychological harm have they suffered? The fact that these questions are left unanswered shows the lack of construction of suffering. Importantly this negates this research's key argument that for civilian harm mitigation and reporting to be effective the military needs to see and thus understand the extent of suffering their actions have caused so they can empathise.

Once again, it is illustrated that uncertainty precludes the knowledge the military rely on for this judgement, this is evident in the following statements: 'The third truck hit a dirt berm at approx 10-15mph. There is no evidence of the state of that third driver' (CS398 2016), 'Condition of individual could not be assessed post strike- assumed affected/potentially injured' (CS398 2016), '(the weapon) destroyed the target, but that 1x transient had moved into the area prior to strike, condition currently unknown' (CI855 2017). Here condition/state/disposition are all used interchangeably reflecting the continued inconsistencies within the reports. The words used like 'state' or 'disposition' are equivocal and ambiguous, providing no way for the reader to imagine the suffering which is taking place. Furthermore, the reports give no information to why they cannot make a judgement on the suffering caused, it is unclear whether the body is visible at all, or whether the quality of technology prevents this. Importantly, there is pre-existing knowledge which could

allow the screeners to assume what kind of harm may have been caused for a more representative reflection of reality. For example, the military could use existing medical literature to construct what suffering may have occurred at the site of the body when within the target area of the strike. Instead, they make the judgement that no decision could be made about the suffering rendering it to not exist at all.

Another way that suffering was constructed was in the sense that the bodies were referred to in their ability to move themselves after harm was caused. For example, in one report: 'The driver of the tractor did not exit the vehicle. Thus, we assess potential CIVCA' (CS171 2016). Alternatively, 'the driver and passenger of the white pick-up truck exit the vehicle on their own power and moved away' (CI122 2015). Using the words 'exit' and 'moved' gives no suggestion on whether they walked, crawled or hobbled away in which detail would give a better understanding of the suffering incurred.

In another instance:

Five to six individuals assist this possibly wounded adult male by supporting him as he walked and sometimes carrying him, helping load the individual into the back of another bongo (CI266 2016).

Here the military contradict themselves by suggesting 'possibly wounded' but the fact that he is being assisted to the extent that he is sometimes carried would suggest he is definitely wounded.

The military goes on to assess that:

based on the fact that the individual was able to walk at times with aid of another person, the nature of his injuries were assessed to be non-life-threatening (CI266 2016).

Once again it appears that attention paid to this element of suffering to suggest the extent of their injuries were not debilitating. This illustrates the clouded categorisation of the aforementioned clear/wounded/ killed which reflects the over simplistic nature of this construction. Furthermore, it is clear that the military are attempting to quantify the suffering caused for institutional purposes instead of trying to get a real understanding of the damage they inflict.

In one stand-alone example the report describes the body 'After impact and secondary explosions...one of the passing civilians tending to a civilian with observable injury prostrate on the ground' (CI422 2017). Prostrate means lying face down with arms stretched out, like a position of worship (Prostrate 2023). Arguably 'lying face down' is more descriptive to help imagine the scene. The phrase 'observable injury' also gives nothing away to the suffering that the body is being subject to, what kind of observable injury has been inflicted? Furthermore, the word 'tending' is delicate, and the use of the word prostrate, which references worship suggests the scene is peaceful.

The military's description directly juxtaposes those made by local people, which is a telling illustration of the different pictures the language from the two realities construct. This is evident in the description made by a New York Times interview with Ali Younes Muhammad Sultan:

“If it weren’t for her clothes, I wouldn’t have even known it was her,” he later told me. “She was just pieces of meat. I recognized her only because she was wearing the purple dress that I bought for her a few days before” (Khan 2021b).

This illustrates the different accounts of reality of the US military and local population, highlighting the argument that to the drone operator the human feelings are not shared ' (Allinson

2015, p.116). When descriptions like these are read in the context of these reports the harrowing account of harm may elicit a wider range of emotions compared to the military's detached view. Contrary to the military's institutional necessity to understand the extent of harm, local people are describing their suffering out of confusion and the hope for this to end. This is a clear divergence in epistemology which impacts the differing realities.

The fact that the military does not construct suffering at this level means it will not be constructed elsewhere, as these reports represent accounts of the situation on the ground which will be disseminated through the ranks. These feedback mechanisms are important to the military practice on debriefing, in which soldiers' thoughts and feelings are considered part of the reality of combat (Shalev et al 1998). However, this has shown that the reality of combat is not adequately actualised and therefore there is nothing to suggest that more meaningful change needs to be implemented.

An argument could be made that it is in the interest of the military to not construct suffering to protect the service people involved within these airstrikes. In this sense the military's attempt to 'try to name and contain the horror of human suffering' (Cohn 1987, p.706), to prevent negative feelings associated with being to blame. On the basis that shame and guilt are some of the most relevant moral emotions which are key to responsibility and rectifying wrongdoing (Schori-Eyal et al, p.2 2022). It can be argued that these emotions are denied through the justification of harm through this mechanism and within the Just War tradition more broadly. If the construction of suffering was properly constructed then these feelings may be exhibited. This argument of maintaining military morale then emphasises the argument that the local communities continue to

be the sacrifices who pay the price with their bodies (Khan 2021b). This represents wider issues with the use of aerial warfare in this context because the contract of war is undermined through these air wars and there are moral doubts about killing the enemy when you are not prepared to die (Zehfuss 2012, p.7). This research adds to this argument because it is not only the enemy being killed but civilians too. What's more not only are the service men not prepared to die but they are not allowed to feel guilt and shame about their conduct.

Therefore, this research supports the argument that these civilians have 'become foot soldiers' (Butler 2004, p.39). If this argument was further addressed than would civilian harm mitigation be more effective if we treated those who died as if they were soldiers in an outsourced war? It is clear that the US:

reveres its fallen soldiers: the media pay tribute to the dead daily, politicians running for office reflexively invoke their sacrifices, and members of the public demonstrate their wide support (Mcfate 2014, p. 46).

It is worth bringing this argument back to those illustrated in the literature which highlights the racial element which makes these lives more expendable. As this research has thus far illustrated these civilians are seen to be in close proximity to the enemy and therefore far away from the construction of 'Good Americans' in this discourse (Jackson 2005b, p.154). It is therefore clear that although these civilians died for the US cause, and the distance and construction of the conflict prevents feelings of guilt or shame, it is unlikely that the US military will treat those who suffered as equal foot soldiers.

### **Description of weapons effect on infrastructure**



The research has thus far explored explicit construction of suffering; it will now address how suffering is implied within the reports. The inference of suffering is very common throughout the data set where the destruction of the weapon is described in proximity to people: 'There were three civilians observed within the blast radius of the (redacted) missile when it detonated on the target vehicle' (CS296 2016). Similar proximity is mentioned in (CS158 2015; CS237 2016; CS159 2016; CS1517 2017; CI422 2017). Although what suffering is caused upon these bodies and the closeness of this proximity is not adequately described, from the description of the weapons impact on the infrastructure the levels of suffering can be inferred.

This description is most imaginable with examples such as 'The munition penetrating the roof of the target facility before exploding from within' (CS603 2017), 'one impact crater' (CS474 2017) 'had at least 1 large hole in the passenger compartment' (CI051 2015). 'The support structure had four large holes from weapons impact' (CS768 2017). This proves that the military do have the capacity to more accurately describe the events they are observing. Furthermore, this contradicts the arguments that there is limited information to make assumptions about harm caused. This detail adds description to the vague statements made within reports such as 'injured from the strike effects' (CI266 2016). By inferring what the 'strike effects' mean when analysing them in these contexts gives some idea of the kind of suffering that may have taken place. The failure to address the bodies in this way shows the inability of suffering to be constructed and therefore imagined. Instead the destruction of buildings is described which may help create feelings of success amongst the military involved.

In a similar case, the description of the weapons impact is written alongside the mention of where the people are present; 'the debris and ejecta from the blast encompassed the area where the three (3) PAX were walking' (CS1382 2017). Instead of explicitly saying that the debris and ejecta hit the people the reader is left to make the assumption or connection that these were linked. Similarly, the language choice of encompassed is passive and does no justice to the velocity and aggression of the weapons effects. This is also evident in the phrase 'Both vehicles and pedestrians appear to have been enveloped in the explosion' (CI467 2017). The use of enveloped suggests gentle folding, and gives the reader no understanding of the impact of the weapons and therefore the possible suffering incurred. The connection can be made here with Cohn's discussion of gendered language in war and the use of 'abstract' terms to describe weapons effects (1993 p.232). However, the poetic use of terms like encompassed and enveloped is not necessarily associated with masculine language, it seems somewhat feminised to detract from the aggression of the event.

On the other hand, use of aggressive language like destroyed or exploded are only used in references to target structures or vehicles again with only indirect connection to the suffering of the body. For example: 'large oil truck engaged exploded during the attack, presumably killing the driver' (CS398 2016), or

The vehicles travelling in the target area at the time of the strike were disabled or destroyed. It is also more likely than not that the operator and/or potential passengers were injured as a result of the strike (CS071 2015).

Neither of these sources which use the aggressive language of destroyed and exploded explicitly say the body of the driver exploded or the body was destroyed. 'Presumably ' gives room for the reader to hope that there is a possibility that the driver survived, however it seems unlikely. The

military's description of weapons' effect on infrastructure reflects how they have institutional needs that differ from civilian harm mitigation and reporting. In this sense, it is more important for the military to describe whether their strikes have led to the destruction of buildings with strategic importance, unlike the body of an innocent civilian. This once again highlights a key foundational issue of the military and civil societies conflict of interest.

## **Collateral**

Finally, a point must be made on the construction of suffering in relation to the 'collateral'. Collateral is extensively used within the data set in relation to damage, injury, concerns and hazard areas, which this essay argues are limited in nuance between definitions. Collateral damage is the technical term for the unintentional and in-excessive harm which is allowed to be caused to civilians under the laws of armed conflict (Kiernan 2003, p.847). Unlike the previous analysis there is literature on this issue similar to this research approach. Specifically, literature is aware of collateral damage as a term and its ability to:

palliate the suffering related to it, and makes one forget that what it actually refers to are humans, mostly innocents, who are being harmed or even killed in an armed conflict (Schwenkenbecher 2014, p.94).

Importantly, collateral damage does not just refer to harm which is accidental but is a regular and adjustable occurrence of war (Crawford 2013). This is supported by this data set in the following statements:

The CE (Collateral Estimate) was within the (redacted) delegated to him by the CG, and that expected collateral effects in terms of expected civilian casualties and damage to civilian property was not excessive in relation to the anticipated military advantage (CI505 2017).

The concrete and direct military advantage for engaging oil tanker truck was not excessive where 1 civilian was killed or injured per truck (CS398 2016).

This illustrates that the military is not 'taking active steps to not kill civilians' as the Just War literature suggests (Walzer 1992). Importantly this is in no way conducive with the human security approach which frames civilian harm mitigation and reporting in this research. From the perspective of the local population ““They didn't gain any advantage” “The only thing they did is they killed children” (Khan 2021b). Importantly this essay argues that if suffering was adequately constructed, accepting collateral damage as a normal outcome of war would seem less trivial. What's more it is key to understand this within the context of the tenuous link between drone strikes and military success (Carvin 2012; Greenfield & Hausheer 2014; Finegan 2018). Situates the importance of this essay's argument which undermines the 'just' frame of modern conflicts.

Consequently, in line with this essay's argument, if appropriate words were used like 'mass murder' instead of 'collateral damage' then thinking would change (Cohn 1987, p.709). Thus, if the following sentence was constructed differently: 'Flames jumped from the target to a civilian boat 20 meters north, causing collateral damage to the boat and WIA SLANT of 0/1/1' (CS1101 2017). It would read: flames from the weapons engulfed a civilian boat leading to one woman and one child being burnt. Thus, if suffering was adequately constructed within reporting the ease at which the military could intentionally cause suffering to civilians under the guise of 'collateral' would be less and the strategic military advantage may seem diminished.

## Chapter VI

### Assessment of knowledge

It is the intention of this final section to explore the knowledge basis which informs the military's construction of harm. As anticipated from the literature the knowledge which has been used is high-end visual technology (Wilke 2021, p.12). Interestingly, the research found that uncertainty has been relied upon throughout the data set which undermines this technical knowledge basis. This dichotomy is represented in local populations' confusion: “A military with such a wealth of information? How could they miss?” (Khan 2021). However, the literature suggested that local knowledge would not be used as a sound epistemological basis for the understanding of harm, due to subjectivity associated with experience, and in turn the connection between this and femininity. What is initially striking is that the military have embraced uncertainty yet reject the subjectivities of local knowledge. Although uncertainty and subjectivity have some nuances they both differ significantly from the objective knowledge that the literature anticipated the US military would rely on.

This being said, 14 out of the 40 reports referred to the use of some form of secondary source from outside of the military. Half of these secondary sources were Airwars which highlights the degree that the US military is willing to work alongside civil society. Through analysis so far this knowledge based on experience and local populations has not been evident through the clinical and un-empathetic approach to harm caused.

First, this section is going to explore the military's assessment of local knowledge, specifically local reporting and the basis they make for rejecting this. It will draw on the foundational literature which anticipated that experiential knowledge would be rejected on the basis of it being emotional and therefore subjective (Hansen 2014). Although there is limited explicit mention of these reports being rejected on this basis, there are grounds to make this argument through connection to the surrounding literature. It will end by discussing two cases where emotion evidently informs the military's decision making, to support the argument that emotion and experience cannot be removed from epistemology. What is clear is that in line with Cohn's argument, emotions which are considered masculine are not considered emotions at all (1993, p.242).

Significantly, the first two sections highlighted how uncertainty is key to the US-led coalition's judgement. Uncertainty first precluded the assessment on who was to be dehumanised. Therefore, the bodies upon which suffering was to be allowed and legitimised was large based on the chance that they might be in close proximity to the enemy. In the second, their understanding of what harm they have caused allowed them to argue the least suffering had happened on this basis of uncertainty. It has thus far been argued that this uncertainty benefited the US military's assessment because it limits their accountability as they can diminish the amount of suffering caused on this basis. Therefore, the argument has been built that uncertainty itself is an important form of knowledge for civilian harm mitigation and reporting. This is in line with prominent philosophers of war such as Clausewitz who argue that uncertainty is decisive through 'its disruptive effects on orders of public reason and the social identities they sustain' (Barkawi & Brighton 2011, p.127). It is clear that the reports have shown the military has monopolised upon

uncertainty while rejecting the subjectivity of local knowledge. This negates from the argument made by Clausewitz that in the absence of knowledge the importance of luck and chance prevails (Barkawi & Brighton 2011, p.138). Instead this essay follows the argument that power allows for the military to decide which knowledge base to use regardless of its viability.

### **Local knowledge**

It is clear within the reports that the US military evaluated the quantity of secondary knowledge to the judgement of their conclusion. This was clear in how the US military often commented on there being not enough information to support Airwars (CS398 2016) or Airwars only being a single source (CI112 2015). The rejection of local knowledge on this basis of lack of quantity is common within the data set. However, from the surrounding literature it is clear the military do not go searching for other forms of knowledge in the way of interviews or examining the sites (CJTF-OIR 2017, p.1). Therefore, the statement in the majority of reports which say 'review of all reasonably available information' (CS383 2016) illustrates an unwillingness to consider what information is not available. From the perspective of the US military, only multiple secondary sources amounted to 'fair reporting' as seen in (CS768 2017). However, this is not a precursor for secondary sources to be accepted for example in one example over 30 local sources were collated and rejected by the US military who had instead based the knowledge on only 2 of their own intelligence reports (CS603 2017).

Not only was the quantity of evidence questioned in relation to local knowledge but the type of evidence was also questioned as often being insufficient (CI079 2015), although in this

case the reasons for this are unclear. This is supported by the quote: 'The Washington post article may indeed be factually accurate, but cannot be proved or disproved based on available evidence' (CI051 2015). It is unclear what evidence would prove or disprove, only on other example the evidence which is sufficient is given: 'Provided deed to the residence, as well as the four death certificates' (CI064 2015). This is rare considering the US military makes it so difficult to raise a claim evidenced by the fact that they would need to provide: 'date, time and location of the incident, a description of deaths or injuries and why it is thought the US military is responsible', what's more the website is in English and they would need access to the internet and a laptop (Bijl 2022, pp. 26-27). In these examples it's not just that the military uses their visual technologies to observe first hand as argued by Wilke (2022) but they also need to visualise the evidence second hand by reviewing death certificates. This is evident in the case where the report accepts that all local media and social reports are consistent with the airstrike but that:

Numbers of dead and wounded in reports range from 20s to 30s and dozens to 40s, respectively. .. however, no dead or wounded are visible in the photographs (CS705 2017).

In this case the military have to see for themselves that suffering has taken place, reflecting the findings of part two of this research. What is clear is that the military exhibit low levels of empathy judging on the definition of empathy as 'willingness to accept another person/ groups interpretation of events' (Head 2016, p.103).

In one report the knowledge of local sources is rejected on an emotional basis. When attempting to come to the conclusion of whether 30 people who were killed were in fact civilians the report states 'It is difficult to determine whether these claims amount to anything more than a



febrile rumor' (CI505 2017). The word 'febrile' means 'extremely active, or too excited, imaginative, or emotional' (Febrile 2023). The quote goes on to say that this 'is characteristic of some media and social media reporting arising out of West Mosul as the fighting intensified 'and comes to the conclusion of ' (probably less than 10) (CI505 2017). This appears to be an unempathetic comment to make about a battle which is regarded as 'one of the most brutal urban warfare campaigns in modern history' (Ferguson 2018). The use of the word febrile does an injustice to the confusion, panic, distress of Mosul. This clearly disregards local contexts and experiences which are necessary to peacebuilding and development (Newman 2011). This is important because civilian harm mitigation and reporting are ultimately a key part of the peacebuilding process.

This is again reflective of the distance between the US military and the situation on the ground, is clear evidence that there needs 'epistemological reorientation: shifting vantage point of the event from one primarily visualised from the air to one that grounds multiple spatialities' (Ford & Richardson 2023, p.13). What benefit is it to people on the ground to make up rumours? This report makes no mention of ISIS propaganda or affiliated reporting, unlike in cases where local reporting is rejected due to its association with ISIS (CS159 2016; CS383 2016; CI175 2016; CI467 2017; CS603 2017). It is clear that the civilian casualties are not getting the same media attention as the violence caused at the hands of ISIS (Friis 2015). It is clear that condolence payments are made very rarely and on an adhoc basis (Magid 2021), and therefore the argument can not be made that this is being manipulated. It is unclear what local populations have to gain by making up rumours other than as part of their futile battle for justice over the suffering which

has taken place. On the other hand, this research has exemplified that it is clear the military do downplay the suffering they have caused.

### **Emotion as a knowledge**

This research set out to explore how suffering was constructed within civilian harm mitigation and reporting mechanisms, and the knowledge which informed this construction. Although there has been limited explicit rejection of local knowledge on the basis of its connection to the subjectivities of human experience, there is a clear prioritisation of the military's own knowledge. As the surrounding literature addressed how a key rejection of local knowledge was based on emotion it felt appropriate to address instances that emotion was evident in the military's judgement of harm. Two cases stand out in this context because it illustrates how the experience of the military personnel impacts the judgement on the campaign, which draws the objectivity of military knowledge into question. This suggests it is a form of personal experience as much as the knowledge which informs local people. This is supported within the literature on military strategy which suggests the majority of decision making 'remains subject to commanders' judgement' (Grant 2003, p.44), this draws claims of objectivity into disrepute.

The first instance is a discussion which is clearly laden with emotion, which further represents the disconnect between the US military and the local population. What's more the language highlights the lack of empathy of the military person involved. In this case an email thread is included within the report discussing whether a woman will get ex gratia payment for her car being destroyed. Between 2014 and 2017 regardless of the millions of US dollars allocated for

condolence payments, not one person has received payment for civilian death (Khan and Gopal 2017). Although literature has criticised the complicated process and failures of this scheme (Bijl 2022) this has failed to reflect the possibility that the US military is unwilling to pay on the basis of lack of belief that the local people are deserving of the payments.

Within the email thread Brigadier General John Cherry comments that 'Although she doesn't seem to broke up over the deaths, she claims civilians were killed when she lost her car' (CI051 2015). It seems that this military person is surprised that the woman doesn't come across as more upset about the people who died from the airstrike and seems he may be questioning the legitimacy of her claim. This is reiterated within the report overview:

Oddly, the woman did not express outrage that her friends/family were killed in the strike but she was upset that her car was destroyed' (CI051 2015).

This continues the thread about how the military does not make assumptions about what is not visible. When they cannot directly see suffering they do not assume it is there, in this case they want her to describe her experience for them to believe that suffering has taken place. The military are challenging the emotional basis for her grief and showing no sign of empathy.

In the second instance, emotion is signified when the US military personnel express joy about dropping a drone strike. Within the incident the weapons system office (WSO) states 'let's just get this last bomb off' regardless of the fact that positive identification of the individuals as the enemy was not determined (CI244 2016). In the report a group of three individuals increases to six and 'WSO states 'Oh this is perfect man, yup join up' inter cockpit at (redacted)' (CI244 2016). This is in line with articles which suggest that drone pilots spend the majority of their time

bored with brief moments of excitement (Ingersoll 2013; Power 2013). This illustrates how the military's own knowledge is informed by personal experience and emotion.

Exploring these reports exemplifies the ways individual military experience informs the military's own knowledge basis. What's most significant is the illustration that emotion is key to the military's judgement. Although there is acceptance of the importance of experience in decision making (Tillberg 2020), there is a failure to account for the importance of emotion to this process. Instead, literature on military strategy suggests that it's clear that emotion is seen as a binary opposite to rationality, therefore decisions which are seen to be emotional cannot be regarded as rational (Zlinncik 2022). The findings of this part of the analysis suggest that the way the military addresses emotion needs to change because their decisions are clearly impacted by emotion. These findings therefore illustrate the contradictions in the military's claim to objectivity which is based in 'technical expertise and to the disciplined purging of the emotional valences that might threaten their objectivity' (Cohn 1987, p717).

This research has exemplified how emotions are clearly visible within the process. This illustrates that accepting the importance of emotion is one way in which the military need to be more reflexive in their approach (Danielsson 2022). Therefore, this essay agrees with Jaggar:

Emotion are neither more basic than observation, reason or action in building theory, nor secondary to them. Each reflects aspect of human knowing (Jaggar 1989, pp.171-172).

Examining the reports case by case uncovers that the US military is subjective in the sense that they change their opinion in different contexts and that emotion is key towards this.

What is of the utmost importance is this finding means the military need to change their approach to the way they reject local knowledge based on judgements about emotion and subjectivity. It is clear from the literature that the emotions the military exhibit are not considered emotions at all based on the association of these with masculinity but those which local people exhibit are associated with femininity. This dichotomy allows the military to frame their knowledge as objective, devoid of emotion and replicable but this point has illustrated this is not the case. On the other hand, they have rejected the knowledge of local people on the opposite basis to this. Therefore, the argument that experience is personal and cannot be generalised, and thus civil society cannot represent all experience (Julian et al 2019, p.216), should be used to frame the military's knowledge too and local knowledge should be treated as a representation equal to that of the militaries of the incidents that are taking place. Although it is important to accept that civil society cannot account for every individual experience, this same critique must be applied to the claim to objectivity made by the military, which allows them to privilege their knowledge over that of other sources.

## **Chapter VII**

### **Conclusion**

This research set out to understand how civilian harm mitigation and reporting is celebrated as a tool to protect human security yet suffering continues to exist to a large extent.

It addressed this in the context of the outcry at civilian harm caused during the Russian invasion of Ukraine and how this juxtaposed the silence of those harmed by the US led coalition in Syria and Iraq. Although this research does not cover Afghanistan, Yemen and Somalia the same argument can be applied.

What was clear is that what distinguishes the US-led coalition from authoritarian regimes like Russia and Turkey was that they abide by certain Laws of Armed Conflict (LOAC) such as proportionality and necessity which are used to construct the conflict as 'Just'. These are used to show that the US military does not intend to harm civilians. Civilian harm mitigation and reporting was situated here as a key tool which exemplifies how the US military is abiding to these principles. However, what was made clear is that the suffering of local populations does not change regardless of the intent of the perpetrator which is justified throughout this tool. What's more, this suffering continues to take place to a large extent with no level of accountability and requirement for genuine change.

Significantly the preliminary research illustrates that civil society groups such as Airwars work closely alongside the US military to support civilian harm mitigation and reporting

mechanisms, and lobby to improve them. This set the foundations for this research to question how so much harm could still take place regardless of this tool being in place and being supported by civil society to such a large extent?

It addressed this puzzle through analysis of US military reports on US-led coalition airstrikes which admitted causing a degree of civilian harm. This case was chosen due to the fact that the US military has been praised for the steps they are taking to mitigate civilian harm (Woods 2016) and have one of the most extensive civilian harm mitigation and reporting mechanisms (U.S Department of Defence 2022). However, they continue to have a disproportionate acceptance of harm compared to the figures by civil society (Airwars 2023a), and fail to have been held accountable for the large-scale suffering they have caused.

Through exploration of surrounding literature on civilian harm mitigation and reporting this research found little had been done to address what led to the different reality of the US military and that of local populations represented by civil society. This led this research to look deeper into the epistemology which informed both sectors. This highlighted that civil society was informed by notions of care and compassion for the experience of those who suffered. This led this research to take a gendered approach to analysis because these concepts were associated with femininity. What was most significant is that the association of forms of knowledge with femininity being regarded as irrational and emotional was anticipated to lead to the US military rejecting the knowledge of civil society and the local populations. What's more the sanitised construction of suffering associated with masculinity was expected to be observed.

Key literature which informed this research was that of Cohn's which explored how the use of masculinised language within the military downplayed the suffering of the body and would prevent decision makers seeing the harm they were causing (1987; 1993). This led the research to focus on the construction of suffering itself as key to the military's understanding of harm.

An initial challenge in data collection was reconciling the military language with a gendered approach explicitly. This led to data collection to focus on the construction of suffering more broadly. The literature had also pointed to how dehumanisation was an important precursor for suffering to be justified (Michel 2022, p.286), along with inductive reasoning based on the initial data set this became the first data point. The second data point focused on what was and wasn't said about suffering drawing heavily on a gendered approach. And the final data point addressed what knowledge informed this construction based on the assumption that the military would favour objective and rational knowledge sources (Cohn 1993; Hansen 2014).

A gendered approach turned out to be a fruitful addition to the analysis most prominently in two regards, first and most explicitly, in terms of the construction of suffering upon the body, and second, in a more inferred sense, was due to the rejection of knowledge which was considered subjective and emotional.

In the first case, suffering upon the male body was explicitly denied based on assumptions about their complicity in violence based on gender. This supported arguments made in other literature that this perpetuates gender stereotypes (Carpenter 2005). What was most significant was



the importance of this finding in the context of this essay argument that masculine institutions like the military struggled to see the suffering they committed. The theory had suggested that suffering is considered to take place only at the site of the feminised body (Pain 2015, p. 66). Therefore, masculine observers would struggle to see any suffering. The fact that the military failed to see suffering at the point of the male body compared to that of the female body was therefore significant. As the male body is a key signifier of masculinity it supports the argument that suffering is associated with femininity.

In the second instance local knowledge was rejected based on its subjectivity, this was clear because the US military did not accept local knowledge sources based on their not being enough evidence, or the right evidence. In one case it was clear this rejection was based on the evidence having origins in emotion, through the claim being labelled as nothing more than a 'febrile rumour' (CI505 2017). However, a contradiction arose where the military themselves were clearly making decisions based on emotion too. Although this was not explicitly gendered, the extensive literature which connected rejection of subjectivity and emotion due to its association with femininity cannot be ignored (Hansen 2014, p.23).

These two points come together to form the main reason that civilian harm continues to take place to a large extent because within this tool the suffering caused is not adequately constructed. What this means is the true reality which takes place as a result of these airstrikes is not actualised through the language within these reporting mechanisms. This means that the military themselves do not see the human suffering they are causing because it is not properly constructed in a way which does justice to the reality of people on the ground within these

countries. Because this is one of the only feedback mechanisms for the military this false reality is disseminated throughout the institution. This framing of harm which downplays suffering supports the Just War tradition and allows the continuation of suffering to take place.

Significantly one of the main aspects within the reports which allowed this inadequate construction to take place was the military's reliance on uncertainty. Although the military proclaims an epistemology based on high-end technology which allows objectivity (Wilke 2021, p.12). It was clear this was limited by the quality of visual and internal intelligence which meant the majority of the military's judgement rested on uncertainty. This reliance on uncertainty allowed the military to frame harm to have either not taken place, or to have taken place at the site of the enemy.

In the first instance suffering did not exist because it was rendered invisible. The military based their knowledge on the observable and therefore assumptions about how many people were within vehicles and structures was always low. What's more, when the view of the intelligence drones was obscured no assumptions were made of the suffering which could have been taking place. This was exacerbated by the military's institutional necessity of focusing on target structures as per their strategy. Thus, the focus of reporting was angled towards the success of the military's strikes on destroying target buildings and vehicles, and not the visibility of people.

In the second, the body of the enemy had already been dehumanised within military and national discourses which meant suffering did not need to be constructed here. Both of these instances, resting on uncertainty, allows the military to construct the least possible amount of

suffering to have happened. This allows the argument to continue that they are causing the least harm possible as per the discourse on Just War.

This reliance on uncertainty further contradicted claims to objectivity, in this sense this essay argued uncertainty itself was a form of knowledge which played into the hands of the military and Just War tradition. The failure of the military to accept alternative forms of knowledge from civil society, representing local populations, shows a clear hierarchy of institutionalised judgments which illustrates that state centric forms of knowledge continue to be privileged. This once again must be considered from a gendered perspective in which state- centric knowledge is associated with masculinity (Hansen 2014). Failure to move away from this conceptualisation of knowledge is undemocratic and will prevent any real people focused understanding and improvements of preventing harm.

Throughout the reports the language used has been abstract and technostrategic as anticipated by Cohn's work (1987; 1993). This language choice has prevented the real construction of suffering caused to a large extent. What this has importantly highlighted, is whether the US military constructs it in this way to protect their own morale. If this is the case then what is clear is that future critique of the effectiveness of civilian harm mitigation and reporting need to have an honest discussion about the foundational differences between the aims, intentions and epistemology of military strategy and civilian harm mitigation.

In relation to this, this research has highlighted clearly that the US military's strategic and institutional aims are in direct conflict with that of civil society and local populations. First in terms

of strategy focusing on the military operation, in the way of observing target communities and buildings as well as weapons impact, over the importance of the presence of human beings and the possible human suffering. And institutional aims of reporting in a systematic manner which ensures the numbers they produce on the harm they cause are as low as justifiably possible, over telling the reality of the situation on the ground. Consequently, the US military wishes to frame conflict in a way which allows it to continue to take place, whereas civil society wishes to frame it in a way which prevents it.

In this case it's worth questioning the synergy of this mechanism into the responsibility of the military. Although it may be argued as the only way to stand up for suffering during conflict, by its existence it's clear that this mechanism allows the narratives of Just War to continue without a real understanding of suffering taking place. Therefore, the arguments for substantial change to take place are left with no room because the military can argue that no suffering is being seen to exist.

In this sense the Just War narrative is self-validated and self-reinforced by the military downplaying suffering within these reports. This is therefore a cyclical process in which the Laws of Armed Conflict (LOAC) gives justification for the suffering caused and then the inadequate construction of suffering within the reports supports the continuation of the harm being framed as Just under the LOAC. Although the argument can be made that less harm takes place because of this tool's enforcement, the fact that this tool exists allows more harm to take place in the long run because it props up the Just War tradition which allows liberal democracies to continue causing harm.

It seems therefore that the military downplayed violence to allow it to continue. This argument is relevant in the context that the visibility of ISIS violence was mobilised to escalate the violence of the global coalition against terrorism (Friss 2015). This manipulation of violence for national interest is thus a trend. Although this points to a negative picture of the way the US military address civilian harm, it does suggest that if violence was adequately addressed in the right frame as a result of it being adequately constructed, then there could be more successful attempts to end it.

This research opens up many avenues for further research into this puzzle. Due to restrictions of time and resources only 40 credible reports were covered. Further research should consider the vast data set of non-credible resources in which the US military rejects claims that harm took place. This would greatly supplement this research's work on understanding the knowledge basis for judgement, most significantly what grounds the local knowledge is rejected to the extent that no harm is considered to take place. Furthermore, the construction of suffering by the perpetrator is an area which is unexplored within the literature and has scope to transcend the boundaries of international security. For example, this level of analysis could be conducted on internal reporting mechanisms on police brutality.

As highlighted within the relevant literature, this research further emphasises the importance of studying emotions in the context of international security, specifically the use of empathy to prevent violence. This research would have liked to have dived deeper into the importance of emotion and its taboo nature when it comes to decision making. This is especially

important in the context of military decision making, although it is unclear how much emotion is still associated with femininity it is clear that the military still takes a 'hard-nosed' approach to suffering. What is important for future research is whether the care and compassion, which defines the charity sector and civil society, can be reconciled with military institutions. This is paramount to understanding how human security approaches which are intertwined with the military can be useful.

In sum, this research has brought together arguments against framing war as just and situated civilian harm mitigation and reporting as a key tool within this debate. Through exploration of this data set it appears that civilian harm mitigation and reporting mechanisms used by the US military may be more aptly labelled as *civilian harm justification*. What does this mean for civil societies fighting for the prevention of civilian suffering? It is clear that giving militaries the responsibility of causing harm and simultaneously preventing harm cannot be effective. Therefore, the responsibility of investigating and reporting on civilian harm should be led by civil society, to have clear transparency while not interfering with institutional interests. The prevention of civilian harm must always be a priority of the military however this research has illustrated that this is difficult to make possible. For the fight for human security to be genuinely successful modern conflicts must not be fought under the pretence of them being 'just'. For this to be possible, the suffering which is taking place must be constructed by the militaries who are causing it.

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## Appendix A. Codebook NVivo 12

Name	Files	References
<b>Humanisation</b>	20	65
Classification of human being	10	22
Adult male (ADM)	16	37
Children	7	9
CIVCAS	4	10
Civilian	12	31
In relation to surrounding	14	32
Driver	1	1
Occupants	1	1
Operator	1	1
Passenger	2	2
PAX	9	24
Pedestrian	3	3
Individual	7	18
Noncombatant	6	8
Others	3	4
Person	8	10
Personnel	7	11
Slant	8	18
Transient	7	16
Transient civilians	2	2
Transient person	2	4

Victim	2	2
Woman	2	3
Family	3	3
Movement	5	14
loaded	4	4
Movement inanimate object	4	7
Movement of vehicle	15	24
Movement of human being	17	43
Squirters	3	14
Visibility of human being	1	4
POL	3	6
Use of names	4	5

<b>Construction of suffering</b>	38	158
Collateral Damage	22	37
Collateral Concerns	5	7
Collateral Damage Estimate	7	13
Collateral hazard area	3	3
Collateral injury	1	1
Kill zone radius	1	1
Description of human suffering	14	20
Body	1	1



Description of weapons affect	31	68
Dropped	2	3
Releasing	1	1
SPLASH	4	8

<b>Knowledge source</b>	18	41
Emotion	2	5
Local Knowledge	11	18
Assessment of local knowledge	13	23