

Department of Defense Press Briefing by Brig. Gen. Matthew Isler on Central Command's Targeting and Civilian Casualty Investigation Processes

Press Operations

Brigadier General Matthew Isler, Assistant Deputy Commander, U.S. Air
Forces Central Command

Oct. 25, 2017

BRIGADIER GENERAL MATTHEW ISLER: Today, we're going to talk about munition selection. As we support our partner forces liberating urban areas from ISIS, where ISIS has used the urban terrain and civilians for their protection. I'm going to specifically address assertions made by some NGOs, that air-delivered, precision-guided munitions are prohibited under the Law of Armed Conflict due to their wide-area effects.

Instead, precision-guided munitions are lawful weapons. They provide commanders with precise, deliberate, proportionate effects to -- to achieve necessary military objectives. In all our operations, coalition forces, including Air Force's Central Command, are committed to taking all feasible measures to protect civilians from harm while executing our missions.

Over the next 10 minutes, I'm going to highlight steps in the targeting process, and munitions selection and weapon deployment that are specifically designed to mitigate weapons' effects in order to protect civilians, structures and non-combatants.

First, we're going to discuss methods of target selection that present -- that protect civilians and structures. The overall process of target selection was discussed by -- (inaudible). She talked about both deliberate and dynamic targeting, and the focus on dynamic targeting for all my examples.

Target selection identifies an object of military value, and answers the law at question of distinction. The target selection doesn't start right then, it starts well beforehand, well before the strikes process in developing an understanding of the surrounding environment.

And this process of characterizing the environment continues throughout the target selection and target engagement processes. Characterizing environment is called intelligence preparation and environment. It means using everything at your disposal.

All your sensors, visual sensors, human intelligence, signals intelligence, multisource

intelligence to determine where ISIS is, where civilians are, and where ISIS is located.

The objects that they value, things like their command and control, their weapons, their VBIED productions, and then defensive obstacles like berms, trenches and tunnels. This results in an overall picture that the battle space that's constantly being updated.

This battle space -- this battle space characterization is performed by a diverse team, by air and ground assets. And in both Mosul and Raqqa, it was a big fleet. It outnumbered strike platforms on a ratio between 5-1 and 10-1. It also started a long time ahead of time.

For Mosul, it started nine months before ground operations commenced. In Raqqa, coalition forces started developing that battle space on a similar timeline. It results in a comprehensive picture.

In this picture, coalition partner forces designed ground force maneuver around known areas of ISIS and civilians, and shaped in maneuvers to protect civilians.

So for example, in West Mosul, coalition forces and ISF designed the West Mosul break-in to be particularly in areas that were exclusively used by ISIS to allow freedom of maneuver for the Iraqi security forces, to allow them to gain a foothold while protecting civilians during that breaching.

(inaudible) -- described how you go about target selection and possibly identify targets, so next we're going to talk about munitions selection. Particularly to mitigate impacts on civilians and structures.

This starts by defining the desired effects, and using an iterative process to achieve the necessary results while mitigating the adverse impacts. What are effects? Effects are the change that need to happen in the battle space to accomplish your mission.

It doesn't mean necessarily destroying something with a bomb. Instead, simply getting ISIS to react may provide partner forces enough of an opportunity to get the partner forces to a successful operation.

But sometimes it does mean destroying ISIS fighters, equipment, and capabilities like munitions and VBIED production. Effects also means not doing certain things, like damaging infrastructure or harming non-combatants.

For example, to achieve effects of stopping an ISIS counter-attack, oftentimes just bringing in coalition fighters overhead and generate some noise is enough to disrupt their movement and stop ISIS reinforcements.

So it's typically not enough to get ISIS to leave the area, and it requires more force to dislodge them from that area. Next, joint teams through air weapons options, infusing options that

achieve the necessary effects, while limiting impacts of nearby structures and non-combatants. Joint teams in Mosul and Raqqa typically had 10 or more weapons options available and -- in addition to individual fusing options for each of those weapons in order to support partner forces with proportionate fires.

Sometimes this also means that targets aren't struck due to concerns for collateral objects and persons. And so, for example, in east Mosul, when the Iraqi Security Forces first broke in, there was a lot of civilian activity. And on those early dates, it was very common that we planned and knocked off more strikes that we had than we actually -- than coalition forces actually executed.

And, in each of those, you had a conversation with your partner forces of, "Hey, we can't get it done. We can't get it done." And then that dialogue started on "What can we get done?"

The bottom line is that having a variety of weapons enables partner-force success by achieving military effects that are both necessary and proportionate to the military advantage gained.

Finally, I'll talk about mitigating weapons' effects to protect civilians and structures. Coalition forces employ every feasible measure to protect -- to protect civilians from harm and to protect structures while achieving their necessary military effects.

One way is simply by delaying fuse on an air-to-ground munition. What this does is it buries the munition and allows the ground to absorb the frag from that munition and channel the blast. And that protects nearby structures.

And so, for example, in an area where ISIS is delivering mortar fire from a city, right next to a structure and a busy street, coalition forces repeatedly used the capability of delivering a precision-guided munition right on top of that mortar team, delaying the fuse so that it went below the surface, detonated, the surrounding soil absorbed the frag and all the energy from that weapon went up into the mortar and was able to destroy the team and the mortar and achieve the desired effect, while not damaging the structure next door or significantly impacting the passersby on the street. The house would get dirty with the soil, but the structure would be intact.

Another way is by using low-yield weapons, such as the GBU-39 Small Diameter Bomb; variants of the GBU-38, including the GBU-38(V)4, which is a low-yield variant of the 500-pound variant; low-fragmentation weapons, like the GBU-54(V)5, which has a casing that doesn't produce frag -- it's a blast-only munition; and direct-fire munitions like the AGR-20 laser rockets.

These weapons are precise, and they're specifically designed to limit collateral damage. From May 2016 to present, over 25 percent of the munitions employed by the coalition have been direct-fire or lo-co weapons to achieve proportionate effects.

This also includes using specific angles of entry for the munition into their target area. And this allows you to affect an exact floor or location of the hostile force. It also includes the ability to --

within a target structure, to move that end point to still have the desired weapons effect within the target structure, but to protect surrounding structures.

Coalition forces also leverage multiple ISR assets in their ability to do collateral scans. And there's often times in strikes when multiple strike aircraft and multiple ISR sub-platforms are scanning an area to make sure that area is -- is clear of transients and to protect transients during those attacks.

And then required, as -- (inaudible) -- showed you, to get the -- the conditions changed during the time of flight of the weapon after it's released to update that point in order to protect civilians. And then we'll look to reengage in that target at a more opportune time when a proportion attack can be made.

I'm going to end with an example of a GBU38 employment. 500 pound munition that was necessary to protect partner forces from a vehicle-borne improvised explosive device, or VBIED attack.

We've all seen pictures of VBIEDs, and ISIS uses them particularly -- specifically in order to breach, to conduct defensive engagements, and in all of those in order to inflict casualties. In order to attrite their opposing force there.

They're specifically designed for the purpose of inflicting casualties. There is no other use for a VBIED. Typically take some larger vehicle, SUV, a truck, it may be a car. They'll pack it with explosives, they'll include a detonation device, they'll train the driver.

They'll mount armor plating on it for the purpose of getting it to its destination in a survivable fashion. Armor plating on the front and on the sides.

In open terrain, so before partner forces get to an urban air environment, partner forces typically have the time and space available to engage that use in their own organic means. So they can see it at a distance, they can get their organic weapons ready and -- and engage the target.

Additionally, coalition forces protecting them have time to work our platforms in an area where we can execute that attack and defend them.

As -- as partner forces transition, urban environments then become a lot harder. Because of canyoning in the urban area, and because the partner force and the opposing force are right next to each other.

And so what we learned was we had basically between 60 and 90 seconds to engage that, and that wasn't enough time to get the job done. So we had to come up with -- with -- with other means. And so, those means included train the partner force and equipping them with the resources that they needed.

Going in an offensive targeting effort that was typically deliberate targeting efforts for after the VBIED protection. Facilities, again, the control and the last one was to get them the time that they needed. And that involved emplacing obstacles.

So I'm going to talk you through how -- how that works. Now what this meant for the partner force was, early on in east Mosul there were 10 to 15 VBIED attacks per day. The Iraqi security forces were losing at least 10 to 15 members of the security due to VBIED attacks each day while not achieving a lot of terrain.

That was unsustainable, and so this model helped us to breach that into -- into something that our partner forces can handle. And so I'll just give you an example on how that works. And because I'm not an artist, you're going to have to forgive my -- my drawing here.

So, in the video you're about to see of the Iraqi security forces on May 22nd, the Iraqi Security Forces are still moving from the south to the north. You've got a CTS from the southwest moving toward the northeast. You've got the 9th Division that's coming from the -- from the northwest, and you've still got FEDPOL on the banks of the Tigris.

What you see is that you have Iraqi forces on one side. And, in an urban environment, whereas in a rural environment, you should see that and have time to engage, ISIS knew in the areas you were moving into, and so they would pre-position VBIEDs in structures without the ability to detect them.

So they either wall it over or use a garage, and then they would knock down the wall or drive the VBIED through that and into the -- into your security forces, where they really didn't have time to even get their munitions up and stop that VBIED, because their organic, say, .50-cal weapons weren't enough to stop it.

And so there's a number of ways of attacking a convoy, but with the -- with their capabilities at the time, one technique was to degrade these avenues of approach -- these high-speed avenues of approach -- in order to give the Iraqis time. And this is used in multiple conflicts -- also in Syria -- in order to provide the Iraqi Security Forces time.

And so what the coalition forces would do is know where the Iraqi Security Forces are, or work with the partner forces on what their high-threat avenues of approach were, and then place a crater in there without harming the structures next door.

And so a 500-pound munition would be -- would target the middle of the street there. It would be delayed-fuse -- there's -- you can delay the fuse in multiple ways. And the one you're going to see -- this munition is delayed so it was more than 10 feet below the ground. The entire munition is more than 10 feet below the ground.

When that munition could just -- explodes, just like normally, the ground basically absorbs the frag and the only piece of the blast you're going to see is a plume of earth that comes up, that

you'll see is sprayed locally. But these buildings, other than getting dirty, are not damaged.

The net result of that is this road is not impassable, but, if an ISIS fighter tried to drive the VBIED on one side, it's going to basically get stuck, and then you're -- the Iraqi security forces then could protect themselves.

So let's go ahead and play the video.

So hit stop. So what you're seeing is the friendly forces are on this side. They're going to end up moving this way. This is at night, so it's after the partner forces have established themselves in a defensive position. You see that ISIS has blocked this road.

Iraqi Security Forces are anticipating this is an avenue of approach that -- for which they will -- they will have VBIEDs and -- (inaudible) -- the munition come in here. Want you to pay attention to the collateral structures around here. And the next frame, as you'll see, is kind of flipped around, and we'll see what it looks like afterwards.

Go ahead with the video.

The munition going in -- it's exploding. What you're seeing is the debris and ejecta coming out of there. This is an infrared photo, so, even though it looks really big, it's actually just hot gas and stuff. So that's what's left. It's basically a hole in the earth afterward.

Okay. What about the sewer system? So the sewer systems -- most of these -- those of you who've been to this area, you -- a truck shows up to your house, it pumps water on your roof, the truck extracts the sewage from the separate tanks. These are -- you could see the above-the-ground tanks, if you would, on most of the roofs there.

And then what happens to the road afterward? The Iraqi Security Forces -- engineering teams are just part of what they do. So when they -- when it comes time to advance, they have a bulldozer, they plow it over.

And later when they've secured the area, they repave the streets. So this isn't -- driving around in Mosul, you'll see that the streets are repaved with dirt, and over time that they will get repaved. And honestly there's -- a lot of the streets in Mosul are better off than many of the other streets in Iraq just from cement.

Okay, so the net effect of that is you have a partner force that's able to achieve its objectives. And I realize that's not a very exciting video, but it just illustrates precise, discriminate, proportionate force, and of course, the law of armed conflict used to protect partner forces and help them achieve their objectives.

So the net result of these efforts is the most precise air campaign in history. It also has allowed our partner force to achieve significant liberation of terrain from ISIS tyranny. Precision-guided

munitions to include 500-pound munitions, are a lawful tool and proportionate targeting to achieve militarily necessary results

Coalition including the air component are executing our mission to defeat ISIS, we're permitted to executing that mission with the goal of zero civilian casualties. I look forward to your questions.

COLONEL JOHN THOMAS: Before we begin questions, I just want to -- there's one term of the art, the knock it off. So when you're reading the transcript or looking through, that means knock it off, right? It means nothing more than that.

So you've got -- I think you heard both General Isler and the (inaudible) say it. That means stop what we're doing. And so that's -- that's something that confuses people sometimes.

Idrees.

Q: Somewhat related, I remember in August 2016 there was a roof knocking technique you guys used. Firstly, has that been used again? And what was the rationale in using that? Because it didn't really make sense why that was used.

GEN. ISLER: Okay so I don't want to go into particular TTP's -- I'm not aware of that, and I'm not aware of that piece. I'm aware of the comments to which you're referring, and I'm not aware of the use of that as a TTP.

COL THOMAS: Bill

Q: So, I mentioned there's a lot of lessons learned on how to conduct an air campaign in such an urban environment. I mean, I can't remember a campaign that was conducted this way with so many strikes in such a dense environment.

So how has -- how has this air campaign evolved? I mean, you mentioned early on in Mosul that you would, you know just not strike. You know, what are some of the things that have changed, and what are, you know what are you going to instruct future airmen on how to carry this out?

GEN. ISLER: Shaping operations are really important. We talked about the strength of that deliberate process, it's really rigorous. It's intelligence based, you can control things like the timing of strikes for your offensive advantage.

And the more things that you can do ahead of time to enable that success, the less you have to play pick up game, which is dynamics. You get good at dynamic targeting, but I want to be able to use that strategy. Every time we shape the battle space ahead of a ground component, that ground component is really effective.

So when you look at the operations that happened after Ramadi -- Ramadi, we were brought into to help. From that point on, we're helping the coalition help the Iraqi security forces in their capabilities. And I think the story you will not read about is what the shaping campaign was.

So that typically starts with layered intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance. You get more than one sensor looking at an area, and you're able to dig out a lot of military value on that. And then you build that up, and you know when the ground forces are going to go in, and you bring down that capability to something they can be successful for.

So when you look at the operations in Qayyarah, Shirqat, the cities around the city of Mosul -- all of those were extremely heavily-shaped. When you look at how west Mosul was conducted, and the initial break-in, all the way through halfway through the city, that was a very heavily-shaped operation.

You're going to -- you're probably going to see a lot of reports about the dynamic targeting. But me, as I train the airmen -- and so we're meeting with a team after this to talk about this -- my real lesson is a deliberate effort for layered ISR, to use networked targeting to go further and shape the environment results in operational success that's not translated to the number of ops.

The most recent example of that is Tal Afar. Tal Afar, the Iraqi Security Forces -- they liberated on their own. When they got to the edge of the city, they hit a -- they hit an operating environment that was -- everything that was targetable had been analyzed and hit with precision-guided munitions that was -- that was targetable.

And, when ISIS saw a CTS breach into the southwest part of the city, they were surprised, and they ran out of the city, so the Iraqis didn't have to fight for it. Tal Afar, with the exception of deliberate targeting, kind of stands intact because of that. And ISIS left behind VBIEDs and their capabilities that the Iraqi Security Forces didn't have to face in an urban environment. So that's my takeaway.

Q: So should expect to see more ISR teams, and more, you know -- rolling through that pipeline?

GEN. ISLER: So I think what you'll see is the operational approach that is being used right now -- I really believe in it. And that is I have a partner force that's committed to the terrain, that understands the local politics, and they're fighting for terrain that they're going to own.

And then we bring the capabilities that only the coalition can. So you bring a robust enterprise, and the advantage of the full coalition is everyone brings different stuff, and you lay that ISR on top of it. So that's -- you were talking about ISR integration, and I think you're seeing that throughout that battle space -- and then, where necessary, the ability to bring precise coalition fires, because that's a high-end skill that's really difficult.

The Iraqis right now are developing that capability. They had the -- they have precision

strike. They have dynamic targeting. They just can't do it at the scale that they -- that was required for Mosul.

COL THOMAS: The networks that we all laid down on the ground where, when we're working with partnered forces, they're giving us cultural sensitivity. They're giving us very good local intelligence that we might not otherwise have. And so the "by, with and through" approach has allowed us to understand the urban terrain in greater detail than we might have otherwise never, just Western or coalition forces.

Q: To follow up on that, how -- if you can talk about this, how would the shaping operations for the Euphrates River Valley differ from these urban areas we're talking about?

GEN. ISLER: Ma'am, they're really, really similar. So you're -- you -- you've already been seeing that. So in fact yesterday's news releases -- the Iraqis recorded the results of some of the -- of those shaping operations, layering ISR over the area to characterize the environment.

One thing the Iraqis bring is -- John talked about that -- really good human intelligence. And they have a number of intelligence services. Each brings their own strengths. That is integrated, is shared with the coalition that feeds into the coalition deliberate target practices described, and then feeds into the overall characterization of the battle space that's used for dynamic targeting.

Q: Is it more difficult, though to obtain the intelligence in a more rural areas than it is in urban?

GEN. ISLER: So this is my personal opinion. My personal opinion is it's a lot easier in a rural environment. And that's because some of the -- some of the sensors we use, we like to be able to see things. So for example, the videos that you saw, you're able to real-time characterize the environment.

And then that gives you a lot more freedom to maneuver around it. You don't have to look at things in certain angles. And then in a rural environment, things can change, but in an urban environment they can change traumatically.

You can have movements of 100,000 people really quick, and that's not going to happen in an urban environment -- or in a rural environment. And so, the last piece of that is one thing that made Mosul very difficult is ISIS used the civilian population to protect themselves.

They actively used it by herding civilians into structures and moving them by preventing their -- their -- their self-liberation and movement out of the area. And then they passively used them just by -- by moving their -- so, for example, in east Mosul they didn't -- they didn't -- they moved among the population there.

And so, the level of care has to be -- we have to maintain a high level of care to make sure that you're not harming non-combatants.

Q: Colonel suggested that you might be able to help a little bit with that, sort of, risk assessment and judgment that goes into the target engagement authority. Can you -- I mean, obviously it's not one life versus one life sort of situation.

Combination of the -- the combat necessity one, versus potential risk to a civilian in the other. But can you talk at all about how you went in that role to think about the relative value of a target versus the civilian, is there any sort of rubric you use?

GEN. ISLER: So, every life matters, and everyone involved with this process at the human level, every life makes a difference. And so every coalition member is committed to zero civilian casualties.

In terms of delegation of authorities, right now the authorities have been delegated to allow commanders, at each appropriate level, to use the capabilities at their disposal to protect the partner forces in a -- and enable their success.

Each commander understands their authorities. I don't want to go into specifics, but they have the ability to employ their assets to achieve their objectives. They know the boundaries for that. And when there's edges on the boundary and I'm not sure, that gets pushed up to an appropriate level.

I use -- I use the example of each time within authorities, so in terms of personal experience, if I was unsure, then I would wait and develop. And then if this was a complicated engagement that I was unsure about, this is very easy to push up and ask for help.

I think that every commander, as they're training, goes through that discussion process with superior commanders who clearly understand their authorities, so they're staying within bounds. The commitment, however, doesn't change.

Everyone is committed to the zero civilian casualties.

Right (inaudible).

(UNKNOWN): I've never heard a commander or a planner or an intelligence officer or a JAG or anybody ever assign a human value to a target and say, "Well, this one's worth 10 civilians, and this one's worth five civilians," or "This is worth the destruction of what used to be a hospital," because what I have seen is an effort to try to mitigate the harm down to zero using everything the general described, and in some cases, simply not striking the target at all.

Again there's a timing factor -- most of these targets are planned well in advance, and, when you strike them there's a military necessity requirement. But I've never heard anybody assign a value to it, and for reasons that your question brings out, which is I don't know how to do that.

We're all children of god. I don't know how to assign a value of a military objective versus a civilian who might be harmed by it. I have two civilians at home I worry about every day. So it's really -- the focus is on mitigating it down to zero. Sometimes, you don't get there, and so the intrinsic value of the target sort of comes out at that point. Or you just don't strike the target at all, which creates, of course, risk for others because you're ultimately defending partners and -- (inaudible).

I've never heard anybody try to apply a calculus, and I would not want to work with anybody that made the effort to develop that take.

Q: Last night, Brett McGurk credited delegation of authorities lower to the field, among -- with several other things for the acceleration of the campaign against ISIS over the last year.

So can you talk a little bit about how that's played out at your level, and if fewer -- if fewer deliberate strike decisions are being elevated than before -- elevated to higher levels?

GEN. ISLER: So, right now, commanders have the appropriate authorities needed to protect their partner forces and help them achieve their objectives. We've seen that in Mosul; we've seen that in Raqqa. There's a long line of successes that have happened because they had the right authorities.

What has changed? For me, in my personal experience, what I've seen is I was in Iraq from April 2016 to May 2017. I saw the Iraqi Security Forces grow in capability throughout the entire period. What changed to me wasn't anything in the coalition. It wasn't our capabilities at all. It was that the Iraqis believed in themselves; they were planning operations, and they were taking risks and achieving success.

I saw that transition happen in December of 2016. And what changed for me was the Iraqis fighting next to each other -- different services achieved a level of operational success that got them to the edge of Mosul. But it wasn't going to get them to Mosul.

And what you saw was a realization that I'm not just fighting next to you, but I need to fight with you with everything I've got. And you saw them mass their forces to do integrated operations right next to one another, and then time and synchronize those operations. So east Mosul -- the first half and the second halves were completely different, and it was because the Iraqi Security Forces changed the way they maneuvered massed forces.

In west Mosul, it was because the Iraqi Security Forces massed and made decisions on maneuvers that achieved that success. And in Tal Afar, that's exactly what happened. You've got four different groups, four different services, if you will, that simultaneously maneuvered to overwhelm ISIS, and ISIS ran away.

So every one of those, I credit the development of the partner force. And they're strong and capable, and I think that, if we look ahead, they're going to be capable of securing their country.

COL THOMAS: So as an overall rule, what special, what McGurk said, CENTCOM's position is that delegating to the appropriate level makes the military more responsive and agile, and I think that has proven -- has proven true.

Delegating it to the appropriate level is an art, and when it's delegated to the four-star level and then delegated further as appropriate, in each case and each situation. So we'd certainly welcome authorities that'd allow that to be exercised and allow commanders to use discretion in real time.

Q: Have you felt more -- more emboldened, more liberated to delegate down?

GEN. ISLER: Part of that was a move to do more forward advisement assists. So fighting with the same force a -- an Iraqi division commander now had forces that were advise and assisting him forward, to including joint forces that were advising them on air integration.

So not just -- he then, the division commander, went from planning a ground operation to planning a combined arms operation that changed the way he thought about that. So he now is counting on air integration and can take more operational risk because he's planned for it.

That's -- that's -- that's what I saw.

Q: A question about your credibility assessment teams. Do they look at air strikes only, or do they take note of how surface fires and JSOC targets, or target attacks by JSOC?

GEN. ISLER: So -- there's a -- there's a number of ways of getting an allegation. So allegation comes in, every allegation is taken seriously. Allegation goes to a team, and then they're going to do an initial assessment of it. Typically that's an overlay of what coalition activities were in the area? None.

Okay that one ends pretty quickly. That feedback gets shared by, a lot of times, the -- if you would, the -- whoever shared that may not update their statistics. If there was a coalition strike there, then that goes into a higher level of detail. Does that answer your question?

Q: Well you mentioned air strikes, but I'm talking about the surface fires and targets action by JSOC assets.

GEN. ISLER: So yes, surface fires are part -- are part of that. Yes, JSOC, in terms of the process -- I'm not familiar, so I'm going to have to hand that one over. But yes, there is a process for JSOC to handle credibility assessments, and I'm not familiar with that one.

Q: So that's separate from your credibility assessment?

GEN. ISLER: So is -- if it goes -- so, for example, in the OIR area, they all go to CJTF-OIR.

CJTF-OIR's going to start that, and then I'm not aware on how that gets handed over, but that's your one stop clearing house for that.

Q: (Inaudible).

COL THOMAS: So if the commander -- if the commander's issue at the time, so wherever they're operating, it's delegated to the lowest appropriate commander, which is usually a general officer to -- to look at and make that first credibility assessment.

And then to refer to an investigation if they choose to. If they don't, then a higher-level commander can certainly designate an investigating officer to look in to a situation.

(UNKNOWN): So regardless of which force, we're not going to talk about specific forces or operations, but regardless of which force, it occurs in the CENTCOM area of operations, whether it's OFS, Operation Freedom's Sentinel, or in OIR.

They take all the same casualty -- or civilian casualty assessment process. Also, regardless of the -- as the general said, regardless of the modality or method of engagement, it's all the same process. CJTF-OIR has a cell dedicated to it, because of the quantum of allegations out there. Other forces in support of CJTF-OIR or fighting alongside them in the same battle space have similar processes because they are required to by CENTCOM direction. So it's all one process; they all feed in to the same place.

Q: What incentive does a battlefield commander have to continue the process of an allegation? So if I'm a CJSOTF commander in Syria and there is a strike that might have gone bad, and I get an allegation, why would I pass that up? Or, you know, if there's any gray area in if that was a good or bad strike, why would I continue to have that, to satisfy the next level of command?

(UNKNOWN): Look, we're a disciplined force, so we follow instructions. General Votel is in charge of all of us all, so we follow his instructions to do that.

The other is we're all profession -- professionals in the profession of arms, so we take great pride in our discriminate use of force. The general just walked you through an exquisite process for target selection. And I can tell you, the process for assessing civilian casualty allegations is just as good. (Inaudible)

Q: So you don't assess from the ground, so you're only going off of --

COL THOMAS: Well, we only have the information that we have.

Q: How, with regard to a high-value target -- let's say Baghdadi -- would you take more risk with regard to civilian casualties? Or would he just be just another target?

COL THOMAS: That's not -- that -- I don't think it's helpful to go in to hypotheticals.

Q: Well, I was hoping -- no, in this situation --

(CROSSTALK)

COL THOMAS: That would mean that -- that would mean that --

Q: Well, this happens time and time again, we've heard stories about this before, towards a particular high-value target, and we've been told before that, you know -- you know, one or two civilians have died because it was an important target. It does happen, correct?

GEN. ISLER: Sir, you're -- you're bringing up the specific example we use in every target engagement training that I've ever done, so I -- one of the -- one of the things you try to flush out as you're training your new targeting agent authorities and commanders is proportionality, and to use that as a -- how important would it need to be.

And so the folks that are making those important decisions have a real good grasp on the overall situation. There's a political dimension to that. The individual that you brought up -- there's a -- there's an important political dimension on that, and there's probably conversations that have taken place on that, so that you've done prudent planning.

Q: So the meaning is you would take more risk?

GEN. ISLER: So there -- with each -- each attack, you're going to assess the military advantage to be gained with the potential for harm to structures and non-combatants -- every single one. And you're going to try to tilt that military advantage as far as you can. And there's times where -- where the military advantage is so great that you may have to execute attacks. And I'll give you an example. In --

(CROSSTALK)

Q: Execute attacks and take more risk?

GEN. ISLER: I'll give you an example on the defensive side.

We have soldiers, sailors, airmen and Marines that are forward on the battlefield, and when those airmen come in harm's way, they -- we're -- the -- the coalition's committed to using proportionate force in order to defend those airmen. And so that's one where you go -- you need to be really careful in what you're doing. But you -- your results and your mission's really clear on that.

Q: Now, we've been talking about civilian casualties. Let's say Iraqi casualties in a place like Mosul -- were there any times where you couldn't even use a small-diameter bomb, let's say, on

a target, and you said to the Iraqi ground commander, "You guys are just going to have to go in and take this site out, or probe the site," and consequently lead to more Iraqi casualties? Were there any incidents like that in the battle for Mosul?

GEN. ISLER: There -- that -- that conversation happened every day at -- at multiple levels. And so to go back to the example of initial breaking in to east Mosul. Where 9th Division was kind of stuck in an area that was heavily populated with civilians.

There were periods of the day at which you could help the Iraqis achieve their objectives while protecting civilians. So the civilians were largely contained within their structure. But you had very frank conversations to go on here's when my ability to help you stops.

And that helped them make important operational decisions on when to conduct maneuver and how to conduct maneuver. So it's a conversation back and forth. And just being clear on your ability to do that was really important.

Q: So were there more Iraqi casualties in some respects because you couldn't drop a bomb?

GEN. ISLER: There were some -- there were some times where Iraqis would delay their maneuver because -- because they knew that they couldn't count on coalition fires. There were other times where they didn't have that option.

So when ISIS does a counter-attack, the coalition airmen, as part of the joint force, are going to protect that partner force. And so, that is one where that proportionality and your background overall is -- is really important to be able to make good proportionality decisions in a very dynamic environment.

Q: But were there times again where you couldn't bomb and they kind of had to go in and do it themselves?

GEN. ISLER: Yes.

Q: And consequently, more Iraqi casualties.

GEN. ISLER: Yes.

COL THOMAS: We really have about time for one or two more questions.

Q: Generally the NGOs also collect the civilian casualty numbers, and the numbers that the NGOs generate is way different from the ones that the coalition actually generates. So the gap is so wide, sometimes it causes frustration among the NGO's out there.

So what is your explanation? Why is -- one of those numbers should be wrong, right? Because there's a big kind of difference between the two, so what's your explanation of the

difference? How -- how -- what do you think caused the difference between your numbers and the NGOs numbers?

GEN. ISLER: Yes, sir. John, you work very closely with the NGOs and you had this conversation, if you wouldn't mind addressing this one.

COL THOMAS: So the -- the -- these numbers are never going to match. It's different accounting practices, it's different levels of satisfying that when we say we've adjudicated it, and you saw on that slide there are a number of cases that still have yet to be finally decided by us.

Assessed and or investigated. So all of these are dynamic, we're adding new cases all the time, we're getting reports of them. The NGOs don't necessarily have the same -- they don't clear the books in the same way that we do.

Once we've looked at it and we said clearly we weren't operating in that area, for instance, it may or may not come off of their list, it'll come off of our list. We continue to work through these -- these cases. And so it's not a trivial number that we've -- that we've said may have had a -- a role in those civilian casualties.

But the larger numbers are aggregated. There's duplicates -- duplicative reporting that we find out when we go through. And what we're doing is we are matching databases. They give us these big Excel spreadsheets of databases, and we have our own.

And then we have to look, and we -- we have to do things like figure out what parameters we'll look at. Is it going to be one or two days from the date on either side of the day? Because sometimes the dates are misreported.

Sometimes there's a date line question about in theater or at CENTCOM when it was reported, when we took in the report, when we saw it on social media, when someone reported it to us.

So we have to look at one or two days on either side, or three days. We have to look at one kilometer, 10 kilometers or 30 kilometers, because the city of Deir ez-Zawr is different than the province of Deir ez-Zawr, is different -- is spelled differently on this map, or it -- so there are so many factors that we go through that these numbers are never going to match up.

But what we do on a monthly basis is, the ones that we have come to a determination on to the best of our satisfaction -- we report it out and we say, "This is" or "isn't." You'll see numbers of them that say, "We find them to be not credible; we weren't operating in that area, as best as we can determine."

But there are times that, when they've come back to us, that we've gotten more clear information, and it's allowed us to go back and reassess that. So none of these have ever permanently closed, but these numbers that keep growing, on one side -- we're trying to come to some resolution.

And the way some of the NGOs account for them, they don't ever take them off the list, because it's reported, and we say it's reported, but we have -- we have a -- what we call a credibility assessment. So that's -- it's never going to match up.

The good news is, for an organization like Airwars, we share information, and we work with them to make sure that we do not close off any allegations. And anything that is an allegation, we absolutely go and we take it very seriously, and we work it to a place where we're either sure, or we're waiting for more information.

Q: But the -- but some investigations are closed, right? For example --

COL THOMAS: So they close to a point where we don't feel like we're going to get any new information. Like I said, if nothing comes to our -- to our -- to us that is worthy of re-looking at it, then we do.

Thank you. And a last question?

Q: I have a question.

So you had about two people that looked into these CIVCAS claims before, something like that, and that's been what boosted up to about 14? Is it?

GEN. ISLER: Seven -- so roughly two or three to seven.

Q: Okay.

GEN. ISLER: So what -- you're referring to is -- at CJTF-OIR, even when we had one or two people working on it full-time at CJTF-OIR, we also -- essentially, a back shop at CENTCOM headquarters. We would have -- we had reservists come in for 30, 60, 90 days to do that full-time. So they were never on their own, and -- we did it dependent on what the -- sort of the case load is.

Q: Okay. Do you -- in your report, you mention that you needed -- the teams needed to be built out. So do you believe you still have a bandwidth issue in terms of properly being able to go through and vet these claims?

COL THOMAS: Start with, General Isler, your report and recommendations.

GEN. ISLER: So one thing that I learned in the investigative process is, to go back to the question of why you do it -- because it's the right thing to do. One thing that -- is, every day, coalition members self-report. Our air component goes, "Hey, after a weapons release, two transients walk in." That is -- that is part of self-reporting. Every one of those goes into CCAR process, so you're doing it for the right reasons.

One of the recommendations there was -- I realized that, just doing this process, there's a lot of things that you're doing discovery learning on. So one of those was, in order to do the investigation, we had to develop a common operating picture.

For the three days around the strike, we plotted every single munition, how it was used, everything that happened, to include where VBIEDs exploded, where the Iraqis did their operations. And that took ten people a week to put that together. So there was discovery learning.

And, to the extent that we could translate this to another team, they could just dedicate and come out of there. Because, once you build the common operating picture, it's easy to go, "Hey, where were the airstrikes?"

So we recommended that as a -- as a team and a process by which they also had the connections. So, for example, Mosul civil defense was the team that would go into buildings, excavate, and they had fact data on how many bodies came out of the building, or were there people there or not. And so that was our recommendation. My commander who ordered the investigation, General Martin, supported that. General Townsend supported that. And they discussed that support there in that. That was just a recommendation from an investigating officer.

I don't know how this team stood up. And so I understand that it was afterward. And to me, it would appear like dedicated manning is scalable. I just need a core of people which we can scale to the workload, because you can pull people off once you -- once you have that. The problem with starting with zero is really, really tough.

Q: I guess I don't -- I don't really understand what your recommendation was. Was it that you should have this common operating picture of everything that goes on -- well, for very -- for every day as a baseline? Or just for certain incidents?

GEN. ISLER: Ma'am, it was so that we -- there was a team that was standing to address credibility assessments. So, every allegation that came in, they'd be able to initiate the process and determine which ones they need to do more robust assessments on.

COL THOMAS: So not a second-line additional duty, but having them -- so the new headquarters element that came in through CJTF-OIR -- we were talking with them, and they were talking with their predecessors, two or three months in advance, saying, "Here's who we think you probably need to bring in, and these are the requirements you probably need to fill."

One of those was, you're going to have to bring in some inherent capabilities organic to your organization at your headquarters -- be ready to do credibility assessments and do civilian casualty investigations, because if you don't, you're going to have to pull people off of other duties.

So it's more of a resource question when they did their transition of authority and they came in and they took the flag -- that they were prepared to do that and they've dedicated those people. That was their choice, and it was appropriate to the -- to the case load.

Q: Was the recommendation to have a seven-man team, or just a standing team?

COL THOMAS: A bigger team.

Q: A bigger team.

COL THOMAS: Okay. Thank you very much for your time today.