



# News Release

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November 30, 2016  
Release Number 20161129-36  
EMBARGOED UNTIL 1100 EDT

## **U.S Air Forces Central Command completes Dayr Az Zawr investigation**

TAMPA, Fla. – A U.S. Air Forces Central Command investigation of Coalition airstrikes near Dayr az Zawr, Syria, on Sept. 17, 2016, has found that, although airstrikes likely hit forces aligned with the government of Syria, the strikes were conducted under a good faith belief that the strikes were targeting Da'esh in accordance with the law of armed conflict and the applicable rules of engagement.

The investigation found the targets were misidentified based on a reasonable interpretation of the information available on the compressed timeline that defines a dynamic strike. The evidence showed there was not a deliberate disregard of targeting procedures or the rules of engagement.

The investigating officer has identified several factors that led to the misidentification of the targets, and has recommended improvements to existing processes.

The strikes were carried out by Coalition forces, including U.S. aircraft, under the coordination and control of the Combined Air Operations Center.

“In this instance, we did not rise to the high standard we hold ourselves to, and we must do better than this each and every time,” said Lt. Gen. Jeff Harrigan, USAFCENT commander, who has already ordered improvements based on lessons learned during the investigation.

Prior to the airstrikes, the target underwent a thorough assessment, review and validation process. Based on the collected intelligence and actions on the ground observed by remotely piloted aircraft overhead, CAOC personnel assessed that the target was a Da'esh fighting position.

“In my opinion, these were a number of people all doing their best to do a good job,” said Brig. Gen. Richard Coe, the investigating officer.

“In many ways, these forces looked and acted like the Da'esh forces the Coalition has been targeting for the last two years,” Coe said. “The decision to strike these targets was made in accordance with the law of armed conflict and the applicable rules of engagement. But we

concluded based upon post-strike analysis that a number of ‘human factors’ resulted in incorrect identification of forces on the ground.”

Although the identity of those killed or wounded could not be determined with certainty, the investigation found it likely that those struck were aligned with the Syrian government.

Several factors led to the misidentification of the ground forces, according to the investigation. For example, the forces were not wearing recognizable military uniforms and identifying flags and unit markings were not observed at the time.

There were also errors in the development of intelligence, as well as missed opportunities for Coalition members on duty to recognize and voice contrary evidence to decision makers. Human factors like “confirmation bias,” “improper labeling,” and “invalid assumptions” resulted in labeling of individuals as Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant forces early in the targeting process, which colored later analysis and resulted in the continuing misidentification of the forces on the ground.

The investigation also found that Coalition forces ceased the strikes immediately upon hearing through a U.S.-Russia safety de-confliction hotline that regime forces were being struck. However, there was a critical delay of 27 minutes while Russian officials waited for a familiar U.S. counterpart to come on the line before passing that information.

Coe identified lessons learned and areas for improvement in the targeting process, including:

- A recommended review of the hybrid targeting process used in the strike – a mixture of the days- or weeks-long “deliberate targeting” process, and the accelerated process generally used for fast-emerging “dynamic targets.” Harrigian has already ordered such a review.
- Improved information sharing among analysts to guard against the human factors that led to the strike.
- A more effective lessons-learned process in the CAOC to better avoid repeating mistakes.
- Enhanced use of the U.S.-Russia safety de-confliction hotline established under the two nations’ Flight Safety Memorandum of Understanding, to ensure that critical information is communicated more quickly to available personnel.

An unclassified redacted Executive Summary of the investigation will be available on the U.S. Central Command website.