

## **Reaction from Civilians of Hawija on the Committee Sorgdrager Report**

*Wilbert van der Zeijden [PAX] and Mohammed Abdulkareem [Ashor]*



*Pic: Representatives from PAX and Ashor discussing the Committee Sorgdrager Report with the Mayor of Hawija on 27 Jan 2025. Photo Credit: Ashor*

On Monday, the Committee Sorgdrager published its long-awaited report on the 2015 Dutch airstrike killing more than 85 people in Hawija, Iraq. The report's conclusions are clear: The Dutch could and should have known they were hitting a target in a densely populated area; there were mistakes made in the targeting, lacking sufficient preparation and knowledge; top officials at the Dutch Ministry of Defence learned about the devastating effects almost immediately but chose to consistently provide inaccurate information to the Parliament and later blamed US intelligence; and for years, consecutive Dutch governments chose not to investigate what harm the Dutch airstrike caused to the civilians and their community. Dutch Minister of Defense Brekelmans called the conclusions of the report "strong and painful", stated that he embraces the report's recommendations, and concluded that "This should not have happened like it did."

The report's summary was released in Arabic [and English] on the same day and the civilians of Hawija – some of whom were interviewed by the Committee – were eager to read what the Netherlands now, after almost a decade, concludes. Reading the report left many of them



disappointed, adding to their anger and frustration towards the Dutch government. rep “Survivors of the airstrike and the families of the ones who died, are angry. They believe their suffering has been overshadowed or neglected in both the investigation and the report.” says Mohammed Abdulkareem, director of the Iraqi independent organization Ashor. Mr. Abdulkareem, from Kirkuk, has worked in Hawija since 2017, and was part of a team researching civilian harm for the 2022 report After the Strike.

Asked why the survivors are angry, Mr. Abdulkareem explains: “After 10 years, it is very painful to read a report that fails to reflect the suffering of the people of Hawija and doesn’t talk about their rights as civilians.” The victims’ families stated to Mr. Abdulkarim that the reopened the wounds and pain of the night of the airstrike on Hawija. They expressed that their perception of the Dutch government has darkened further, seeing it as ‘indifferent to the blood of the Iraqi people’.

He continues: “I understand mapping the suffering of the victims was not the purpose of the commission. But that in itself is a problem. Finally, the Netherlands decides to investigate what happened, but they only look at what it means for the Netherlands, not for the people who lost their family, their house or their source of livelihood. Those who lost all their savings to medical bills or to rebuilding their houses. How can that not be the most important question. After 10 years”?

Like Mr. Abdulkareem, the mayor of Hawija Mr. Saadon Al-Jabouri’s initial optimism quickly faded into disappointment when reading the summary report, as only a mere paragraph is dedicated to the victims. The Netherlands has proposed to present the report to him in a meeting in Erbil a couple hours driving and several military checkpoints away from Hawija. Most Dutch representatives will join only online. The Dutch also asked him to bring representatives of the victim families. As a first response, while he accepted the invitation himself, the families have refused the invitation arguing that “In our culture, if you do something wrong, you have to come back and apologize.” And as such he once more offered to host a Dutch high-level delegation in Hawija for such an event. He also added that after a decade, ‘the Dutch government now needs to make some tangible commitments in-line with the needs of the victims before coming to Hawija’.

The core of the matter is that the affected civilians in Hawija and their community feel that their demands are never taken serious by the Netherlands. They have voiced them repeatedly and feel ignored. Mr. Al-Jabouri summarizes these demands:

1. Provide a meaningful explanation and apology to the victims of the airstrike. Visit the area, meet with local authorities and victims in the city. And acknowledge and apologize for the harm done.
2. Offer appropriate compensation to all civilians who suffered direct and/or reverberating harm. Individual compensation as well as support for the community still struggling to rebuild the area destroyed by the Netherlands.
3. Offer Hawija compassion and friendship, for example by having a Dutch city become a twin city for Hawija. Imagine how much the expertise of a city like Rotterdam would help a city like Hawija during reconstruction.

Meanwhile, on social media the comments are pouring in from civilians in Hawija, echoing what Mr. Abdulkareem and Mr. Al-Jabouri shared. ‘How will the families of the dead and wounded benefit from this report’, asked one reader. ‘The Dutch could buy expensive weapons but not compensate the victim families’, asked another. Many also alluded to a higher incidence of cancer in civilians of Hawija, which they attribute to the airstrike and the chemicals present in the weapons storage it hit.

Mr. Abdulkareem and his organization Ashor plan to ask more attention for the report in the region and nationally in Iraq in the coming days. In collaboration with Iraqi media, they plan to gather feedback from victims and the broader public. After that, they will launch an advocacy campaign aiming to ask national attention for the case. After a decade of painful waiting, the citizens of Hawija hope that then, finally, the central focus will be the suffering of victims in Hawija and what is needed to alleviate it.