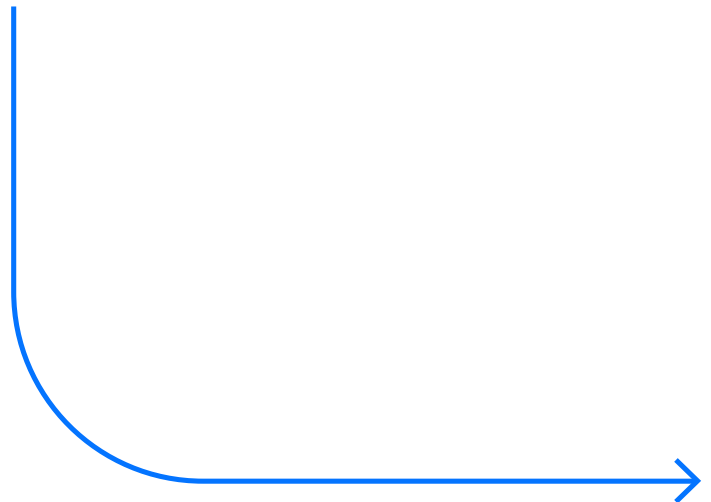


Airwars The civilian harm watchdog

Annual Report

2023/24 Sept—Aug



The year in numbers

9 conflicts monitored

25,000 open source claims monitored

7,000 civilian deaths documented

10 major investigations published

200 articles featuring our work

4 policy breakthroughs

Foreword

The past year found many ways to test our faith in humanity. From Ukraine to Israel and Gaza to Lebanon, we've encountered more stories of loss, worked through more contested information spaces and uncovered more sobering truths - all in an effort to ensure that the children, women and men caught up in war do not disappear behind numbers and disputed narratives.

In the face of intense suffering our team has banded together, united in a shared resolve. We have been reminded of the power and reach of our approach: our documentation has consistently drawn the attention of major international media to key incidents and patterns of harm; provided advocates with the evidence for accountability and justice efforts; and been presented to the highest levels of government around the world. We have produced our most ambitious investigations yet, and pushed back against powerful governments and militaries. We saw major policy changes on areas that were systematically ignored when Airwars was founded, raising hope for better protections for civilians in future.

As threats changed, we've adapted rapidly, including responding immediately to work on behalf of civilians in the most contested of conflicts when others hesitated to take action. The changing nature of conflicts, with the impact of new technologies on harm for civilians and on our capacity to help, has played a major role in informing strategy and initiatives within our wider programmes and networks too.

Looking ahead, we feel better prepared to deliver more for those we seek to support even as specific conflicts evolve and to find the most effective ways to strengthen calls for action on accountability, human rights and justice.

Emily Tripp
Executive Director

Casualty Recording

Building the bedrock of justice and accountability

Our team monitoring conflicts across the globe documented almost 30,000 open source allegations of civilian casualties in nearly 1,000 incidents of harm across Somalia, Yemen, Syria, Iraq, Ukraine and Gaza.

Emergency response in Gaza

Following the October 7th Hamas attack, which killed more than 1,200 people, Israel launched one of the largest military campaigns in modern history. The Palestinian Ministry of Health reports more than 40,000 Palestinians have been killed since then and these numbers continue to rise. Gaza, home to more than two million people, has been decimated.

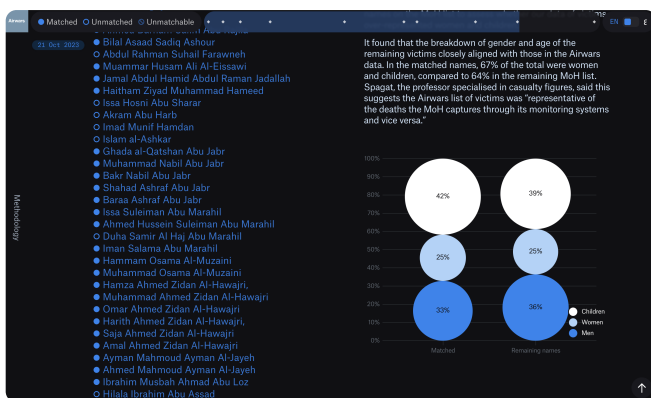
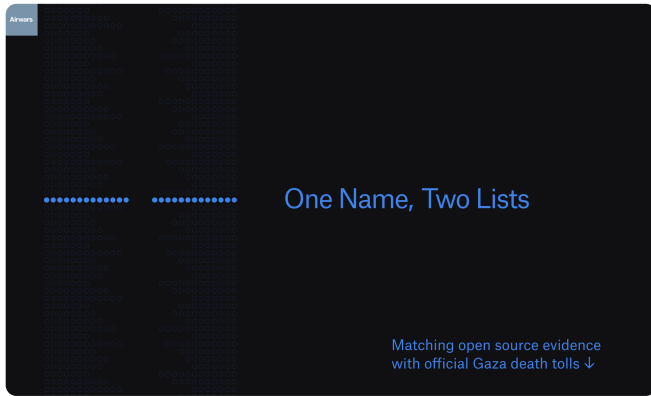
In the days after October 7th, we launched our emergency response and began the biggest documentation effort since Airwars was founded in 2014 - [incident-by-incident documentation](#) of all civilians killed in Gaza. The purpose had originally been to capture all civilian harm in Israel as well, as our team did following the 2021 conflict, but other organisations took up that work.

Our findings added significant value by:

1. Providing reliable evidence on civilian harm: The war has been dominated by competing narratives. Our approach of systematically sifting through the chaos of the online space to gather names and details of thousands of civilians killed has pushed back against mis- and disinformation. Our documentation has been used by every major international newspaper, including The New York Times, The Guardian and The Wall Street Journal.
2. Comprehending scale: Our strike by strike documentation has laid bare the sheer scale of civilian harm. To date, we have identified almost twice as many incidents of civilian harm in Gaza as in eight years of documenting casualties in the war against ISIS. These findings have fed into investigations by Human Rights Watch and others, while our team has briefed policy-makers, humanitarian groups, human rights advocates and governments.
3. Building the foundations for accountability: Documenting in real-time is essential for justice and accountability. Our work has already been used in legal cases, including by the [Global Legal Action Network](#) in their case against UK arms supplies, and by experts including former high-level US officials in a [major report](#) that indicated the US was violating its own policies on weapons supplies to Israel.

Innovative evidence that changed the narrative

READ INVESTIGATION ↗



We use our documentation to make evidence-based interventions into heavily disputed environments. In Gaza a key debate has been the reliability of official death tolls produced by the Hamas-run Ministry of Health in Gaza.

In July 2024, Airwars [published a groundbreaking analysis](#) of more than 3,000 names of civilians killed in the first 17 days of conflict which were gathered independently over nine months by our team. Our research showed a high correlation with Ministry of Health figures, with more than 75 percent of names identified publicly appearing on their official lists.

This was a key indicator that both our methodology and that of the Ministry of Health in Gaza were rigorous, and indicated the official Palestinian death toll is likely to be an undercount - rather than an exaggeration.

The names were listed in a transparent manner to visualise the scale of civilian loss. No other organisation could have provided this lens on the conflict - matching in-depth research, data analysis and powerful visual storytelling to impact the debate in a meaningful way. The findings were covered by more than 20 newspapers globally, including The New York Times and The Guardian.

It is further proof of why we must hear and preserve first-hand experiences of conflict, even in the most intense of warzones.

Away from the headlines: ongoing commitments to civilians under attack

While our team, and much of the world, focused on Gaza in October last year, a major escalation in Syria by Russian forces led to some of the most deadly civilian casualty incidents in years. We teamed up with the Syrian emergency response organisation The White Helmets to [identify incidents and maintain a focus on the unfolding crisis](#).

We sought to document the civilian impact of the joint US and UK bombing campaign targeting Houthi militants in Yemen. Our policy team worked closely with our US advocacy partners [to frame the implications of these cases for the United States](#), given renewed US commitments to higher standards for casualty recording and the UK's poor track record of accounting for civilian harm.

Having built a Ukraine team in 2022 to respond to Russia's escalation, we continued investigating specific incidents as part of a longer-term project. In November 2023, we organised an event at the UK Parliament on investigating harm in Ukraine with leading experts and policy-makers, and continue to work closely with organisations including the Ukraine War Archive.

Impact trail: further changes prompted by scrutiny of US actions

In November 2023, the US published its first press release in almost two years detailing the outcome of investigations into civilian harm during the war against ISIS in Iraq and Syria. Half of the incidents deemed 'credible' by the US originated from Airwars' documentation, giving victims' families a route to justice for the first time.

In summer 2023, NPR [published a declassified US military assessment](#) into civilian harm allegations during the highest profile strike under former President Trump - a 2019 strike on the former head of the so-called Islamic State, Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi. The US investigation dismissed Airwars' original documentation and the work of NPR and others who had also looked into the case. Our senior researcher wrote a [damning analysis of the assessment](#) - pointing out inconsistencies with other investigations, failures to adhere to existing standards, and [a series of flawed assumptions](#).

After collective pressure from Airwars and our partners the Center for Civilians in Conflict and the Zomia Center, in August 2024 the Department of Defense [announced it was reinvestigating the case](#).

Investigations

Exposing harm and humanising the cost of war

This year our specialist investigative unit collaborated on global media partnerships and published groundbreaking stories - all harnessing innovative techniques to better share stories of the lives lost and the families torn apart by conflict.

In September 2023, our immersive investigation exposed Russia's use of Iranian-made Shahed suicide drones, with the sound of the drone and the voices of Ukrainians used as a backdrop to capture the terrifying psychological impact these munitions have on entire communities. Using a combination of data journalism, visual storytelling and first-hand account audio, we explained the impact of these drones - while also uncovering trails showing how component parts manufactured in Europe have ended up in these munitions, despite EU sanctions.

As Gaza began to dominate the global agenda, our journalists pivoted quickly to cover the emerging crisis while continuing to pursue months-long investigations in other areas. Less than two weeks into the war, our team worked with the Financial Times to investigate a series of blasts on an evacuation convoy as hundreds of thousands of civilians fled northern Gaza.

In Egypt, our team met victims of airstrikes in Libya dating back to 2011, partnering with the Guardian and Altinget to reveal Danish military involvement in a series of strikes that killed civilians in the NATO campaign. The story caused a major scandal in Denmark, forcing the Ministry of Defence to launch a review of all the incidents.

Early this year our team reported on a lesser known but significant court case in the Netherlands - explaining through a visual investigation the events leading up to a Dutch strike in Afghanistan in 2007, which is now found to have breached international humanitarian law.



Reputation and recognition

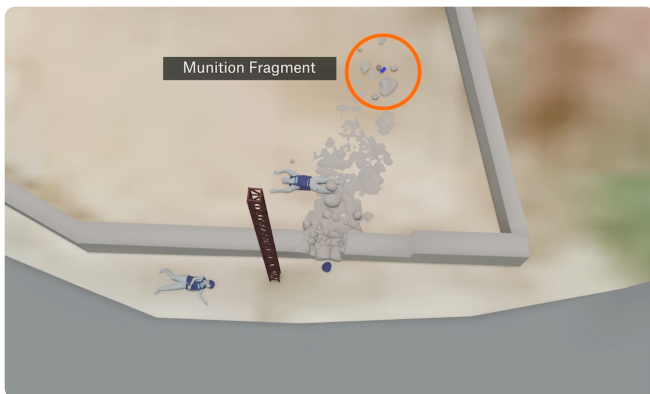
Alongside these reporting initiatives, our team fed into reporting across major news outlets covering the war in Gaza - including The Times, Al Jazeera, Associated Press, The Washington Post and others - advising on specific civilian harm incidents, informing analysis and providing specialist interpretation, particularly of open source imagery.

Our investigative unit was nominated for a series of prizes, winning second place at the Fetisov Awards for our investigation with The Guardian into civilians killed by British airstrikes, while a short film on the same subject won a prize at the Open Source Film Awards. We also won a Sigma Data Journalism prize, while our work was nominated three times at the Amnesty Media Awards - with only the Guardian and the BBC receiving more nominations.

● SPOTLIGHT

Killed in a press vest

READ INVESTIGATION ↗



In late 2023, the international news agency Agence France Presse (AFP) asked Airwars to conduct a forensic analysis of a deadly attack on journalists in southern Lebanon. Reuters journalist Issam Abdallah was killed, while AFP journalist Christina Assi was permanently disabled. AFP reached out to Airwars specifically because of our unique reputation for evidence-based analysis of conflict zones.

By forensically reconstructing the scene, the investigation proved the munition that hit the journalists was an Israeli tank projectile. It showed that there was no legitimate military target near the journalists, and that the tank would have had a clear line of sight. Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch concluded the strike was a possible war crime.

In summer 2024 Assi, who is now wheelchair bound, held the Olympic flame in Paris to represent all journalists killed in conflict.

Policy

Pushing for greater protection of civilians

For more than a decade, we've pioneered a highly successful balance of trusted, impartial research and high impact investigations. These inform our policy recommendations and engagement with decision makers. In our advocacy approach this year, we further strengthened our unique position as a trusted expert by informing and influencing people-centred policy that can save lives.

We stepped up our pressure on militaries, working closely with our civil society partners to ensure that commitments made in previous years around civilian protection were not forgotten - especially as civilian harm reached unprecedented levels.

After several years of pressure from Airwars and our partners, the US Department of Defense released its first ever policy on how to better protect civilians from its own operations. Announced shortly before Christmas in 2023, the policy contains recommendations made directly by Airwars over the last decade of advocacy. As we explained on the [Lawfare](#) podcast, while the policy has a number of limitations, it could ultimately lead to thousands of lives saved in future conflicts.

We took our work on the 2022 political declaration on explosive weapons use in populated areas to its next critical stage - implementation. Airwars [co-convened a major in-person workshop for military personnel](#) from signatory states, including the United States, the United Kingdom, and the Netherlands. In April this year, we discussed our findings from the workshop with key policy makers and campaigners in Oslo during the official implementation conference for the declaration.

We saw the fruition of four years of close engagement with the Netherlands Ministry of Defense with a released approach to civilian protection, the publication of the coordinates of all strikes conducted during the war against ISIS and a [new portal for reporting allegations of civilian harm](#). In May this year, Airwars [co-authored a series of recommendations](#) for the Ministry of Defense for the coming steps of their civilian protection policy development, and [delved into the implications for the Netherlands and its allies on legal analysis platform Opinio Juris](#).

Killed in a press vest

READ THE REPORT [↗](#)

In the UK, after years of failure by the UK government to properly address civilian harm, Airwars took the Ministry of Defence and Information Commission to a tribunal seeking transparency around how the UK military decides whether those it kills are militants or civilians.

For two hours, the witness from the Ministry of Defence was cross examined by Airwars' barrister - revealing new information about the MoD's flawed operations when it comes to casualty tracking. An in-depth Guardian article about the tribunal reported that [the Ministry of Defence lacked "effective oversight" of civilian casualties.](#)

As of September 2024, 10 months after the tribunal, the judges' decision is still pending. Should the court rule in our favour, it would be a major step towards transparency and put critical pressure on the UK MoD to improve its policies on civilian casualties.

Ministry of Defence

Ministry of Defence lacks 'effective oversight' of civilian casualties, tribunal hears

UK government challenged over refusal to release documents about 2018 incident during campaign against Islamic State

Emma Graham-Harrison

Thu 30 Nov 2023 20.27 GMT

[Share](#)



Sector Strength

Innovating to support wider community

A key focus of the last year has been working with a wide range of partners to maximise our limited resources and scale our collective impact.

We've expanded our network to include new partners and allies across human rights, journalism, policy and research, launched new tools and resources for the entire community and trained others to share our methodology and skills - all with the goal of ensuring more is done for civilians in conflict.

This includes a major new initiative to bring together munitions experts, journalists, researchers and open source specialists. The Open Source Munitions Portal, detailed further in the box below, is the first of a number of such major projects in the coming years as Airwars seeks to bolster and support the wider documentation community.

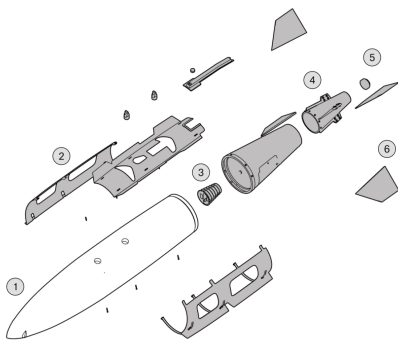
We design our documentation as a starting point for supporting the wider community, including investigative journalists, researchers, academics, lawyers and open-source experts. This year we conducted joint research projects or investigations with a range of partners including The White Helmets, the University of Utrecht, the Guardian, Der Spiegel and AFP. We have also provided documentation for an unprecedented number of journalistic, legal and other efforts.

In June, the University of Utrecht's Public International Law Clinic [produced a legal memo](#) that details the potential application of our work documenting patterns of civilian harm in a variety of legal frameworks, drawing extensively from existing case law. This is the first comprehensive analysis that sets out how our work could be leveraged for specific legal initiatives.

Our joint exercise with the White Helmets was summarised in an article for the humanitarian publication [Fragments](#), where together our organisations called on states to do more to collect evidence of civilian casualties and local stories of harm. Bringing together our open source expertise with on the ground experiences of the White Helmets first responders was critical in finding new ways of working in complementarity.

Accessible munitions portal to equip human rights defenders

[VIEW THE PLATFORM](#) 

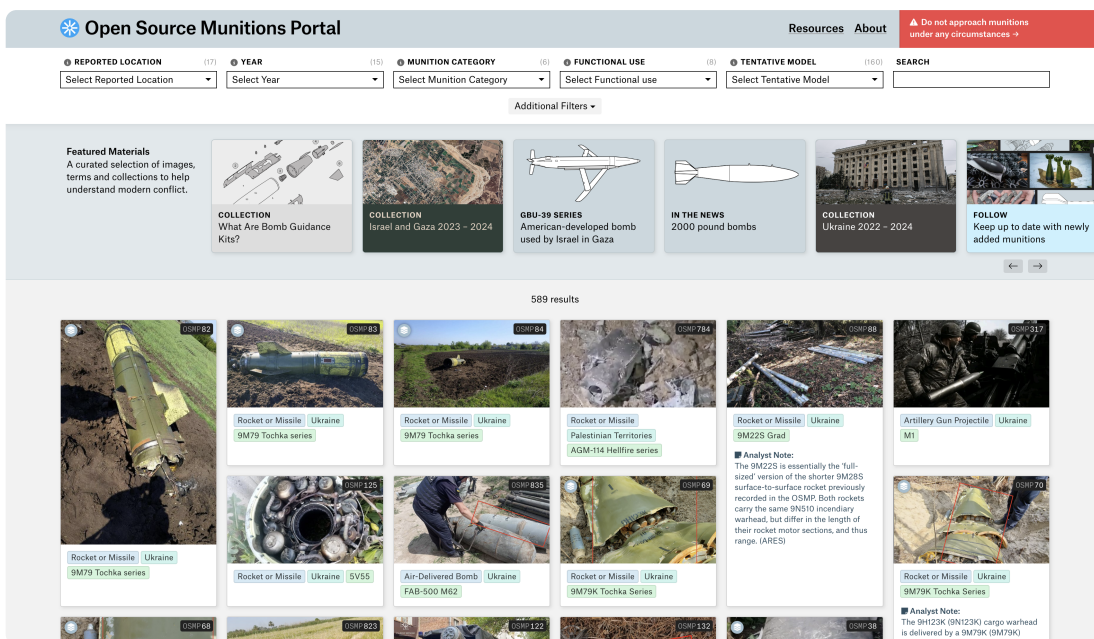
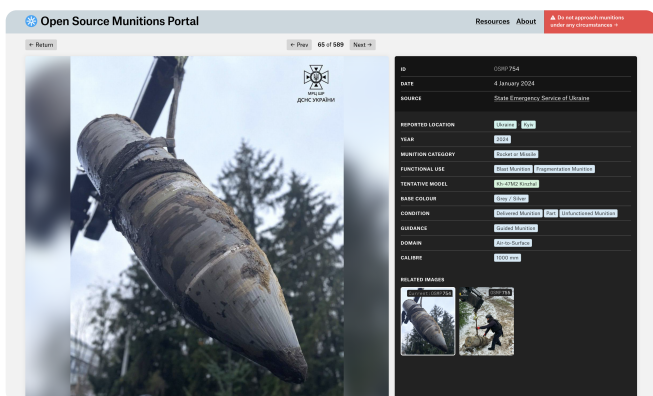


Working in partnership with munitions experts at Armament Research Services (ARES), this year we launched the Open Source Munitions Portal. This accessible, free online tool helps those working on allegations of civilian harm better understand the types of munitions used in modern conflict.

After extensive consultation and feedback, the initial portal was upgraded for full public launch in June 2024 with a range of additional features.

As well as an educational tool, it now serves as an accessible, contextualised archive of hundreds of images of munitions from active conflict zones, including Ukraine, Gaza and Syria. Each image is reviewed by two munitions experts to verify key details including the model ID.

It has already been used in a variety of ways, including by journalists at The New York Times seeking clarity after a strike in Gaza, by lawyers working on accountability for specific strikes in a number of conflict zones, and by researchers to understand more about munitions. In the coming years, thousands more images will be added, building a vital archive of verified information about modern conflict.



Lookahead

No two conflicts are the same and as the world changes, we will continue to develop and adjust our work. With technological advances increasing the challenges in hotly contested information spaces in today's battlegrounds, our pioneering approach combining robust research, informed journalism and targeted advocacy is succeeding in cutting through.

Our plans now to better protect civilians include:

Systematic research

- Enhancing the evidentiary value of our documentation to feed into prosecutorial investigation and strategic litigation initiatives, including expanding our work with the University of Utrecht and specialists in digital archives.
- Expanding our networks with individuals and communities in post-conflict areas to support local justice initiatives.

Technical innovation and storytelling

- Designing crisis-responsive investigations using cutting edge open-source techniques combined with on the ground reporting to focus attention on scale and impact of civilian harm and to hold states and militaries accountable.
- Diversifying our media partnerships to secure a wider platform for the experiences of civilians in conflict, pushing a collaborative approach to connect journalists local to conflicts with major international newsrooms.
- Working on new areas at the cutting edge of modern conflict, including the challenges posed to civilian protection caused by the use of artificial intelligence in warfare.

Targeted advocacy

- Leveraging our existing position and access with US and allies, including navigating significant political changes to push for improvements across multiple related policy areas, including on civilian protection contexts in Gaza and Ukraine.
- Protecting and safeguarding civilian harm mitigation progress in a changing political landscape, particularly in the US.

Sector strength and capacity

- Developing further tools to aid a diverse community of conflict researchers, human rights defenders, war correspondents and advocates, including building a new 'Conflict Protection Monitor' together with Dutch NGO PAX to make the complicated policies of states more accessible.
- Piloting strategic alliances focused on creating more direct routes for those affected by conflicts to influence accountability outcomes.

With Thanks

We are grateful to all our funders for their support and guidance, particularly during a time of scaled need during our Gaza response. With thanks to Wellspring Philanthropic Funds, the Joffe Trust as well as Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust for their long standing support, and to the Reva and David Logan Foundation for a renewal of support to our investigative unit. We saw renewed commitments for our donors on the Open Source Munitions Portal.

We welcomed new funders this year, including a grant from the Network for Social Change, as well as a series of generous private donations particularly around our work in Gaza. In 2024 we secured a series of new grant agreements for the coming year, including the UK Research and Innovation Fund, the European Media Fund and the Swedish Postcode Lottery.

Finances

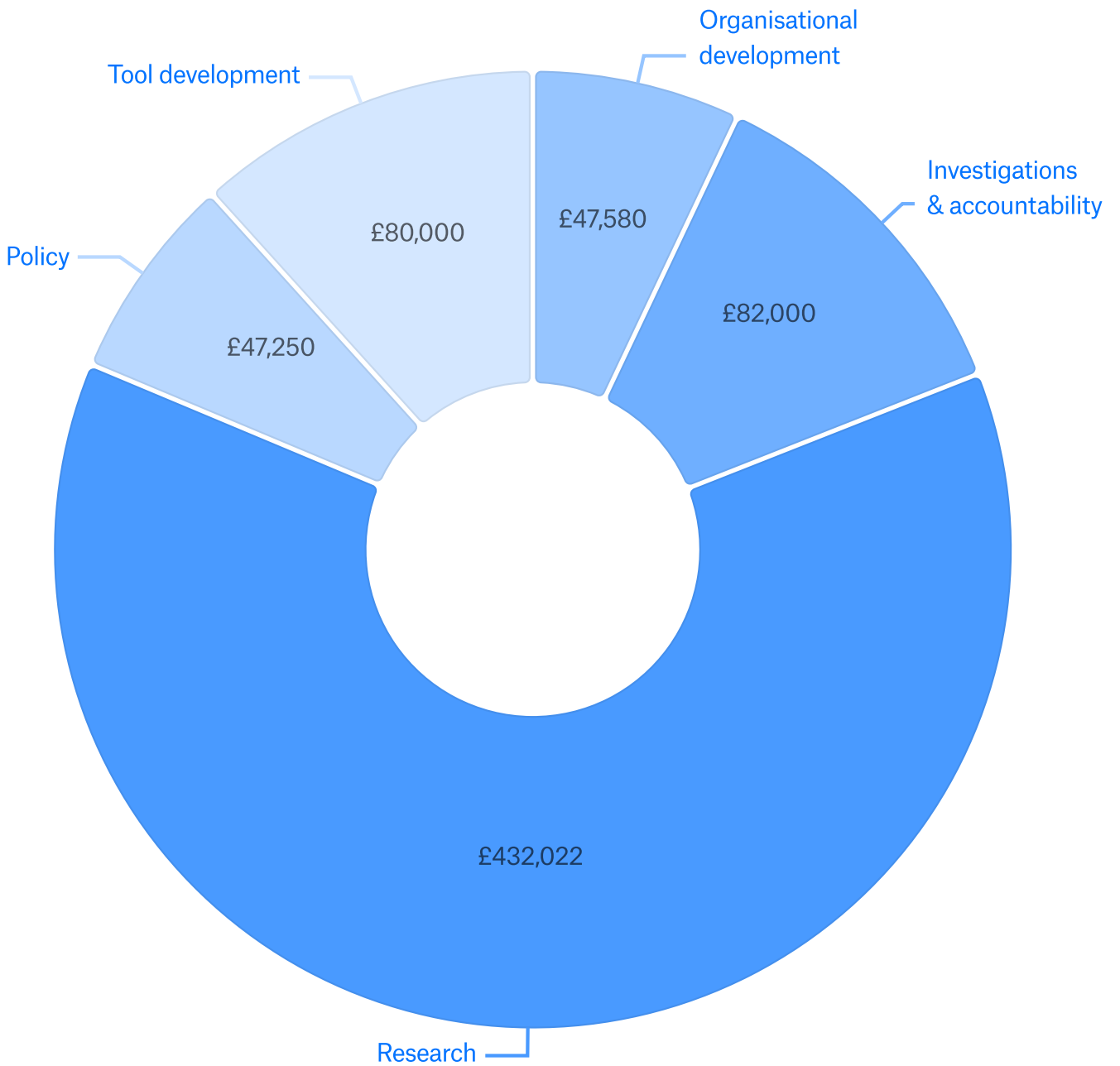
In compliance with our status as a registered non-profit company limited by guarantee in the United Kingdom, Airwars' financial reporting can be found filed on Companies House.

Airwars is deemed to be the equivalent of a US charity, with 501(c)(3) status. Our Foreign Public Charity Equivalence Determination (ED) certificate is available via [NGOsource.org](https://ngosource.org)

In this financial year, our total income was approximately 680k GBP. The majority of our resources have been invested in our research department, including our local language researchers, geolocation specialists and quality management roles. Our investigations and accountability unit, which focuses on in-depth investigations and collecting on the ground witness testimonies, is the second largest department.

You can read about our team and also find the names of all those who generously give their time voluntarily to Airwars on our website airwars.org

Breakdown of expenditure



Contact

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