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A military report warned that striking the giant structure could cause tens of thousands of deaths.

Near the height of the war against the Islamic State in Syria, a sudden riot of explosions rocked the country's largest dam, a towering, 18-story structure on the Euphrates River that held back a 25-mile-long reservoir above a valley where hundreds of thousands of people lived.

The Tabqa Dam was a strategic linchpin and the Islamic State controlled it. The explosions on March 26, 2017, knocked dam workers to the ground and everything went dark. Witnesses say one bomb punched down five floors. A fire spread, and crucial equipment failed. The mighty flow of the Euphrates River suddenly had no way through, the [reservoir began to rise](#), and local authorities used loudspeakers to warn people downstream to flee.

The Islamic State, the Syrian government and Russia blamed the United States, but the dam was on the U.S. military's "no-strike list" of protected civilian sites and the commander of the U.S. offensive at the time, then-Lt. Gen. Stephen J. Townsend, said allegations of U.S. involvement were based on ["crazy reporting."](#)

"The Tabqa Dam is not a coalition target," he declared emphatically two days after the blasts.

In fact, members of a top secret U.S. Special Operations unit called [Task Force 9](#) had struck the dam using some of the largest conventional bombs in the U.S. arsenal, including at least one BLU-109 bunker-buster bomb designed to destroy thick concrete structures, according to two former senior officials. And they had done it despite a military report warning not to bomb the dam, because the damage could cause a flood that might kill tens of thousands of civilians.

Later, three workers who had rushed to the dam to prevent a disaster were killed in a different coalition airstrike, according to dam workers.

The two former officials, who spoke on the condition that they not be named because they were not authorized to discuss the strikes, said some officers overseeing the air war viewed the task force's actions as reckless.

The revelation of Task Force 9's role in the dam attack follows [a pattern](#) described by The New York Times: The unit routinely circumvented the rigorous airstrike approval process and hit Islamic State targets in Syria in a way that repeatedly put civilians at risk.

Even with careful planning, hitting a dam with such large bombs would likely have been seen by top leaders as unacceptably dangerous, said Scott F. Murray, a retired Air Force colonel, who planned airstrikes during air campaigns in Iraq, Afghanistan and Kosovo.

"Using a 2,000-pound bomb against a restricted target like a dam is extremely difficult and should have never been done on the fly," he said. "Worst case, those munitions could have absolutely caused the dam to fail."

[Read the rest and see the photos here.](#)