



The Mitchell Forum

Airpower against the Islamic State A Diagnostic Assessment of Operation Inherent Resolve

Benjamin S. Lambeth

About the Forum

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Introduction

At the end of 2011, President Barack Obama withdrew the last remaining U.S. occupation troops from Iraq after nine years of gradual recovery from the country's near-devastating insurgency following the American-led invasion in early 2003 that finally toppled Saddam Hussein. Yet less than three years later, the United States found itself thrust into a new war in the region, this time not just in Iraq but also in neighboring Syria. That renewed fight was against the self-proclaimed Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS), a uniquely vile jihadist movement that first arose in the ungoverned spaces that had opened up in Syria in 2012 as a result of the steadily intensifying Syrian civil war.

The U.S.-led effort to counter ISIS that ultimately ensued was slow even to get started, let alone show any substantial progress at first. The Obama administration was staunchly opposed to launching into a new war in Iraq after it had just withdrawn the last remaining American military presence from the country less than two years before, even though it was becoming all too evident to most that the rise of ISIS threatened to undo all of the hard-won gains that had been registered in Iraq throughout the preceding decade. The administration's initial combat response only occurred two years later, on August 8, 2014, with highly restrained air strikes against just a few ISIS positions surrounding Erbil, where the U.S. consulate and a substantial American diplomatic presence were located. Those strikes, conducted by U.S. Navy F/A-18s operating from the aircraft carrier USS *George H. W. Bush*, delivered 500-pound precision-guided bombs against ISIS artillery emplacements and support convoys alongside the approaches to Erbil. The carefully measured attacks, entailing the first American use of kinetic airpower in Iraq since the departure of the last U.S. forces from the country in 2012, were solely intended to turn back an imminent ISIS advance on the

city.¹ In underscoring their limited nature and intent, the Assistant to the Secretary of Defense for Public Affairs, U.S. Navy Rear Admiral John Kirby, stressed the administration's insistent line with regard to them: "This is a focused effort, not a wider air campaign."²

After that halting start, the ensuing air effort continued for more than a year in much the same anemic manner, with a persistent lack of any apparent overarching game plan when compared to earlier U.S. air offensives going back to Operation Desert Storm in 1991. On the contrary, the effort showed little headway from an overall campaign perspective, as well as a continued lack of any driving determination aimed at achieving a clearly defined endstate on a realistic timetable as long as President Obama remained in office.

With the unexpected election of Donald Trump as Obama's successor-to-be on November 8, 2016, the prospects for an increase in the air war's effectiveness

took a pronounced upturn almost immediately. Trump had campaigned hard on a promise to ramp up the nation's long-halting counteroffensive against ISIS, which by then had been conducted at a remarkably high cost in the number of sorties flown by U.S. aircraft, precision munitions expended in the multiples of thousands against often inconsequential targets, and billions of dollars wasted to sustain that still largely unproductive effort. True to that promise, within just two more years, what remained of the would-be Islamist caliphate in Iraq and Syria was finally declared by U. S. Central Command (CENTCOM) have been largely defeated.

Viewed in hindsight, the more than four-year-long effort against ISIS that CENTCOM launched in August 2014 finally turned out to have been another success story enabled largely by U.S.-led airpower, which was the deciding factor in providing an essential asymmetric edge to those indigenous Iraqi and Syrian troops

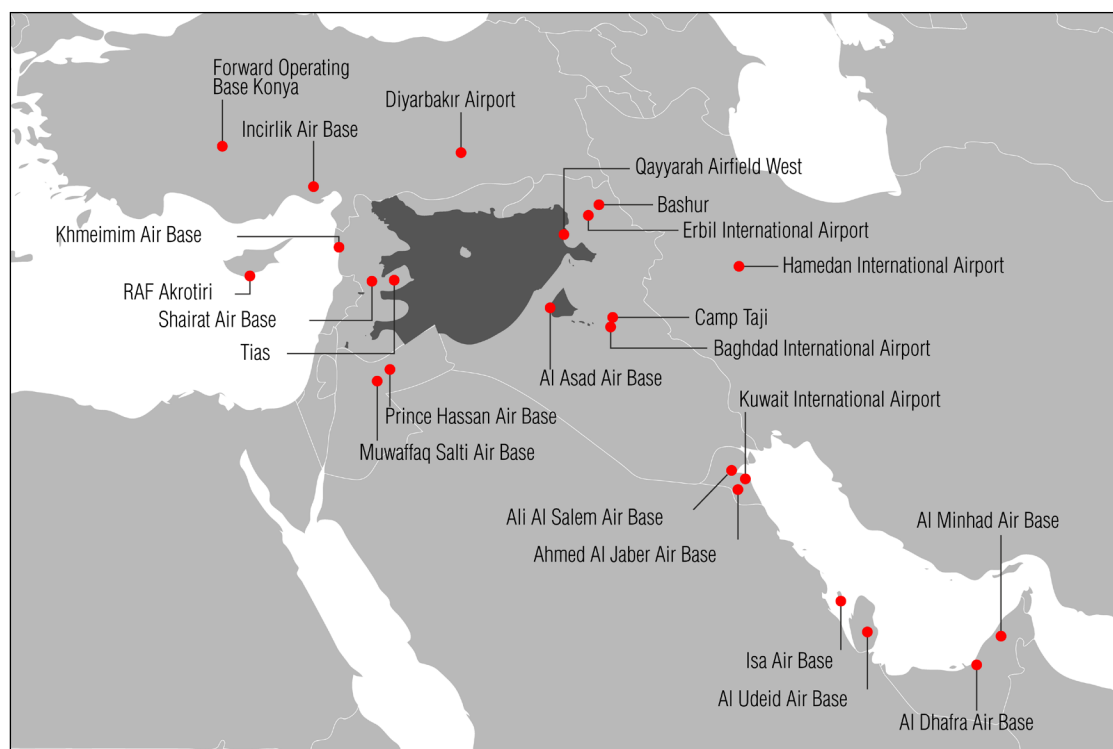


Figure 1: Land air bases used by coalition air forces and area occupied by ISIS as of October 21st 2015

Source: [Derivative work of Master Uegly via wikimedia](#)

who conducted the brunt of hard fighting on the ground. It was that indispensable force element working in and through the vertical dimension that finally allowed both indigenous forces, with the pivotal help provided by eventually embedded teams of U.S. Special Operations Forces (SOF) and joint terminal attack controllers (JTACs), to liberate at long last the ISIS-held cities of Mosul in Iraq and Raqqa in Syria and ultimately to strangle the would-be caliphate in its cradle.

Throughout CENTCOM's protracted engagement against ISIS, the combat performance of the U.S. and coalition aircrews who conducted the campaign at the execution level was invariably able and effective, and that performance well reflected the exemplary standards of operator competence and professionalism that were first so tellingly displayed in Operation Desert Storm in 1991 and later sustained in all subsequent U.S.-led air offensives worldwide. Yet by having wrongly assessed ISIS as just a reenergized Islamist insurgency rather than as the emerging regional proto-state that it actually was, and by also having insisted on excessively stringent rules of engagement (ROE) regarding civilian casualty avoidance aimed at winning indigenous hearts and minds in a counterinsurgency (COIN) war rather than by concurrently attacking the movement as aggressively as possible in its most vulnerable center of gravity in Syria from the very start, the Obama administration and CENTCOM needlessly prolonged the campaign by as much as two years, if not more.

The Air War's Slow Start _____

In the early aftermath of the administration's meager strikes against ISIS that had been authorized by the White House at the effort's outset, the bombing continued just sporadically from one day to the next, mostly in response to recurring

pop-up events at the tactical level and with the administration feeling no apparent urgency to ramp up the effort's tempo and intensity. On the contrary, President Obama stressed even before the renewed bombing's first week had ended that "this is going to be a long-term project."³ Not long thereafter, now three weeks into his still-hesitant effort, the president conceded that "we [still] don't have a strategy yet" when pressed by reporters as to his long-term intentions regarding the new challenge presented by ISIS.⁴

As the administration's halting air attacks against ISIS continued throughout August 2014 at a snail's pace compared to the intensity of previous American air wars going back to Desert Storm, the United States did expand the effort's make-up of participants by enlisting and leading a substantial Arab coalition in striking targets not just in Iraq but now also in Syria. Still, however, by the end of the effort's first full month, although the coalition's pilots had flown 1,871 close air support, escort, and interdiction sorties in all against ISIS, only 280 of those sorties had actually accomplished at least one weapon release, making for an average of fewer than ten target aim points struck per day.⁵

At long last, on September 10, President Obama announced what he billed as his "comprehensive strategy" for engaging ISIS, with an avowed intent to "degrade and ultimately destroy" the jihadist movement.⁶ Yet his resort to "degrade" as the most proximate goal of his slowly gathering effort conveyed every impression of having been a carefully contrived rhetorical ploy intended to telegraph his unwillingness to pursue anything more than a minimalist response to the spread of the jihadist movement throughout Iraq, Syria and beyond. As a testament bearing clear witness

to this impression, organized formations of ISIS combatants continued their relentless advance in Iraq's Anbar Province. Not long after CENTCOM's episodic bombing began in early August 2014, ISIS combatants advanced on Haditha in the province's western sector. In the end, Iraqi forces successfully defended Haditha, but by September and on into early October, ISIS had achieved a succession of other military gains. Within just three short days at the start of October, it succeeded in establishing a firm foothold in most of Iraq's central Anbar Province.⁷

Yet another sign of the administration's less-than-determined response to the rise of ISIS was the fact that the still-anemic effort went unnamed for more than two months. Only on October 15, 2014, did CENTCOM finally declare that its counteroffensive would be known both henceforth and retroactively as Operation Inherent Resolve (OIR), with that code-name said to be "intended to reflect the ... deep commitment of the U.S. and partner nations ... to degrade and ultimately destroy ISIL [Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant, the administration's preferred alternative name for the movement]."⁸ Despite that grandiose characterization, however, the ground truth five weeks into the bombing was that CENTCOM had conducted in all just 412 strike sorties against a still-expanding jihadist movement that now controlled some 50,000 square miles of Iraq and Syria, making for an average of only seven strike sorties flown a day. In contrast, during the same length of time, the allied coalition in Operation Desert Storm flew more than 48,000 strike sorties in all, for a daily average of around a thousand a day.⁹

Three months into the administration's still-languid effort against ISIS, Washington defense analyst Anthony Cordesman reported that the desultory bombing was

continuing to show only "slow and unstable progress" toward achieving the president's proclaimed near-term objectives. He added that the administration had spoken forcefully enough about its declared imperative of "degrading and destroying" the Islamic State, yet "without setting clear goals for what this actually means."¹⁰ On this count, at the time Ashton Carter was confirmed by the Senate in February 2015 to become the administration's fourth successive secretary of defense, public pronouncements by U.S. spokesmen were already characterizing ISIS as "halted" and "in decline."¹¹ However, Carter himself later recalled frankly in his own retrospective assessment of the war that ISIS "was not yet halted" and that the United States still "lacked a comprehensive, achievable plan for success," which had made him "deeply concerned about the state of the effort." Because, in his judgment, the administration still lacked clearly articulated goals or a coherent chain of command for the operation, the American public and important other constituencies worldwide "saw no plan to defeat ISIS and had little confidence in the campaign's success."¹²

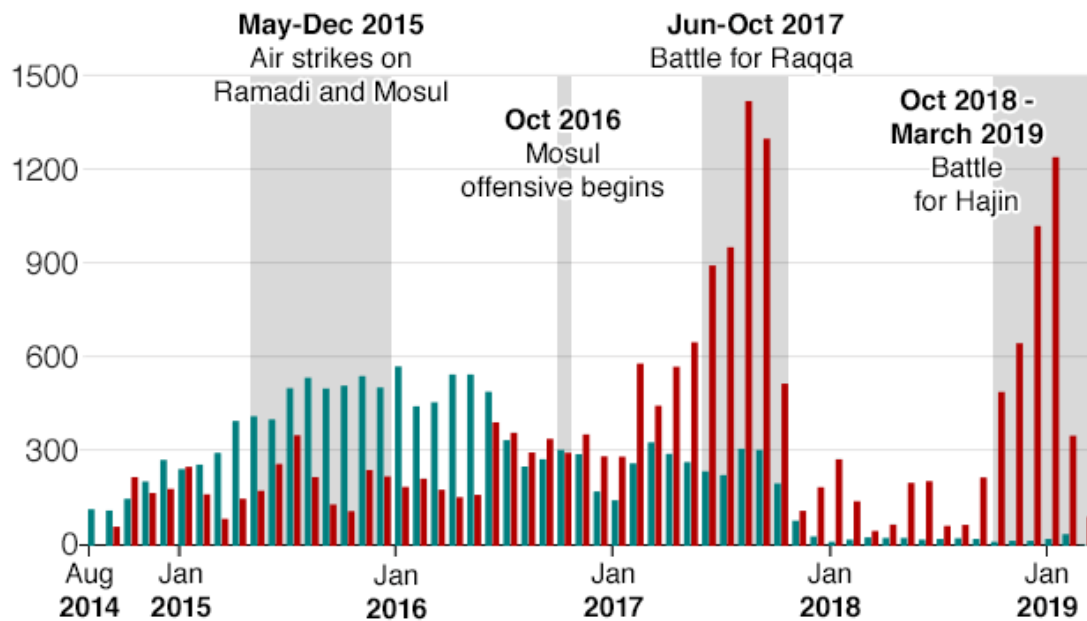
As the first year of OIR was drawing to a close, U.S. officials were anticipating that the still-ongoing air strikes against ISIS might have to continue for at least three more years.¹³ The following August, by then a full year into the still-constrained bombing, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS), U.S. Army Gen Martin Dempsey, went further yet and suggested that vanquishing ISIS once and for all could eventually take up to *twenty* years.¹⁴ Given the administration's remarkably low level of apparent effort up to that point, it was not hard to see why. As of mid-autumn 2015, coalition aircrews had flown more than 57,000 combat and combat-support sorties into Iraq and Syria up to that point. That made, however, for an average of

Figure 2: Coalition Airstrikes in Iraq and Syria from August 2014 to March 13, 2019

Source: U.S. Central Command and the BBC

Coalition strikes

■ Iraq 13,582 ■ Syria 19,288



fewer than twenty strike sorties flown a day against ISIS over the course of 450 days.¹⁵ Nearly the same level of kinetic output was reached within the first week of Operation Desert Storm in 1991.

On the plus side of this otherwise undistinguished latest chapter in the history of air warfare as it had unfolded up to that point, reconstituted units of the Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) finally succeeded by the end of 2015 in recapturing Ramadi, the capital city of Anbar Province that had been in ISIS’s grip since the preceding May. Of that encouraging development, the U.S. Army colonel serving as CENTCOM’s spokesman for OIR proudly announced that “we’re hitting them with combination punches now. They’re getting hit in multiple places simultaneously.”¹⁶ That good news, however, raised the obvious first question as to why such a more forceful approach toward combatting ISIS had not been pursued by the administration from the campaign’s very start.

Toward a More Effective Effort

Fortunately for the longer-term prospects for OIR, repeated terrorist outrages conducted or inspired by ISIS, both in the immediate region and beyond, finally forced the administration to expand its roster of approved targets to a point where ISIS command centers and oil-bearing trucks on the move in quest of revenue for the would-be caliphate finally became fair game for coalition aircrews. As two U.S. Air Force intelligence officers who were directly involved in the day-to-day planning for CENTCOM’s air targeting reported of that eventful stretch in time, “while previous operations were primarily in support of coalition ground units fighting IS forces,” Combined Joint Task Force Operation Inherent Resolve (CJTF-OIR) “empowered [the commander of Air Force Central Command, or AFCENT] to launch deliberate strikes aimed at infrastructure, logistics, and governance nodes deep within

IS-held territory.” By seeking “maximum strategic effect through ‘deliberate targeting’ and target systems analysis,” this belated effort quite properly “sought [to target] the control, infrastructure, and governing hierarchy of a state,” which is what ISIS essentially was, to all intents and purposes. That long-overdue shift in emphasis, they added, “also enabled the Air Force to move from a role as a supporting entity for ground forces to one focused on discovering and disrupting IS critical support networks.”¹⁷

The main mover behind this pivotal change for the better in the air war’s targeting emphasis was CENTCOM’s second successive air commander for OIR, U.S. Air Force then-Lt Gen Charles Q. Brown, Jr., who assumed that position in June 2015 after the bombing had already been under way for more than ten months. As his chief of combat plans later recalled in this regard, “General Brown was the impetus behind this moving of the fight deeper, focusing on strikes beyond the [Army’s] Fire Support Coordination Line....”¹⁸ That significant escalation in the campaign’s level of effort was foreshadowed earlier the same month when the administration finally approved the deployment of American SOF teams into Iraq and Syria to support the ISF and rebel Syrian forces combatting ISIS, and with Secretary Carter promising Congress that the air war in Syria would soon further intensify “with a higher and heavier rate of strikes,” including more attacks on identified ISIS leaders and on ISIS-controlled oil fields and oil production facilities that represented one of the movement’s main financial lifelines.¹⁹

As Gen Brown himself later recalled regarding this increasingly pressing concern, minimizing noncombatant casualties was only one of several impediments that were hindering more effective day-to-day targeting

from AFCENT’s Combined Air Operations Center (CAOC) in Qatar. Upon arriving there more than ten months into the still-desultory air war, he quickly discovered that the U.S. Army-dominated CJTF-OIR was still using the same time-worn “model of dynamic targeting [developed for Afghanistan] based on close air support, armed overwatch and HVI [high-value individual] hunting” as opposed to “deliberate targeting [and] air interdiction,” the latter of which would have been better suited to the evolving campaign’s most urgent strategic needs. He added: “It took some time to move the ball more toward deliberate targeting, but I don’t think it moved far enough, fast enough. Bottom line: Our approach to targeting to include focus by the intelligence community and ISR [intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance] apportionment was slow to come around.”²⁰

By early 2016, CENTCOM at long last began supporting a gathering initiative by the ISF to retake Mosul from ISIS’s control in Iraq and concurrent SDF efforts to advance against the movement’s proclaimed capital of Raqqa in Syria. Yet even with American SOF teams now forward-deployed to the battle lines in Iraq at long last, the end of ISIS’s physical presence in the region was still nowhere near in sight. The special presidential envoy for the global coalition to counter the Islamic State, Brett McGurk, later cautioned in a subsequent interview: “I don’t want to leave any sense that we’ve turned a corner or anything like that.”²¹ In fact, CENTCOM’s effort after more than a year of limited bombing had yet to have come even close to attaining the magnitude of a bona fide campaign as that notion is typically understood by military professionals.

A major breakthrough in the campaign’s day-to-day conduct occurred in September 2015 when CENTCOM, with express White House consent, finally delegated greater

target-attack approval authority down to the commander of CJTF-OIR headquartered in Kuwait, U.S. Army Lt Gen Sean MacFarland. In turn, Gen MacFarland pushed that target engagement authority (TEA) still farther down to his subordinate Army brigadier generals who oversaw CJTF-OIR's two strike coordination cells fielded in Baghdad and Erbil. By former U.S. Air Force chief of staff Gen Mark Welsh's later recollection, substantial credit for that eventual about-face was attributable both to Secretary Carter and to the JCS chairman, U.S. Marine Corps Gen Joseph Dunford, who had worked hard to enable a more realistic discussion of these issues within the president's inner circle and more broadly throughout the Washington policy community.²² Tacitly acknowledging this development that should have occurred at the campaign's start, Gen Brown said: "We're hitting them where it hurts a lot more than we were in the past. Every bomb now has a greater impact."²³

The intensity of aerial weapon deliveries against ISIS targets grew steadily over time from fewer than 200 a month in August 2014 to more than 3,000 a month by mid-July 2016.²⁴ As the ISF's move to retake Mosul began gathering headway three months later, the vast majority of the strikes performed by coalition aircraft—nearly 90 percent in all—were directed not against fixed targets that had been prebriefed before the aircrews launched, but rather against dynamic targets generated by ISF ground forces in real time and facilitated by inputs provided by U.S. SOF teams and JTACs as ongoing friendly ground operations demanded immediate and direct air support.²⁵ That said, however, the air war was still only marking time from a bigger-picture perspective more than a year and a half into its conduct.

A more encouraging harbinger of the air war's slowly improving effectiveness,

however, was the gradual emergence of signs that ISIS's leadership had begun publicly conceding to their rank and file that the movement was encountering declining fortunes on the battlefield and could well be soon facing an imminent collapse of their vaunted caliphate.²⁶ Yet despite the notable intensification of the American-led effort against ISIS since it began in early August 2014, CENTCOM's gradually increased target coverage and bombing tempo more than two years later had still shown little progress toward achieving the administration's avowed goal of defeating ISIS decisively. To make matters worse, a new complication arose a year into the effort thanks to Russia's having opportunistically inserted itself into the war zone in 2015 to conduct aerial strikes on behalf of Syria's embattled President Bashar al-Assad that worked directly at cross-purposes with CENTCOM's air component, as the result of a bold exploitation by Russia's President Vladimir Putin of the regional power vacuum that had been created by President Obama's earlier refusal to honor his declared "red line" against Assad by engaging in the ongoing Syrian civil war in support of rebel forces.²⁷

In all, the continuing vitality shown by ISIS since it first emerged in the wake of the American withdrawal from Iraq at the end of 2011 prompted the director of the U.S. National Security Agency and commander of U.S. Cyber Command, U.S. Navy Admiral Michael Rogers, to declare by late 2016 that the terrorist organization represented by far "the most adaptive target [he'd] ever worked [in 25 years] as an intelligence professional."²⁸ As for the administration's and CENTCOM's belated moves to counter ISIS with more effective kinetic countermeasures, the U.S. Air Force's chief of staff, Gen David Goldfein, was undeniably on firm ground

Figure 3: MQ-9
Reaper, armed with GBU-12
Paveway II laser guided
munitions and AGM-114
Hellfire missiles

Source: [U.S. Air Force](#)



when he declared at the end of August 2016 that OIR was now “absolutely going in the right direction.”²⁹ That said, however, CENTCOM’s former commander from 2010 to 2013, U.S. Marine Corps Gen James Mattis, was no less on target when he offered the more sobering observation that the administration’s effort against ISIS remained “unguided by a sustained policy or sound strategy [and continued to be] replete with half-measures.”³⁰

On a Winning Streak at Long Last _____

Fortunately, the administration’s broader effort against ISIS by mid-2016 had finally begun to show signs of steady intensification after two years of the seemingly directionless bombing of individual targets of opportunity as they emerged. As the long-awaited ISF push to eject ISIS from Mosul began gathering headway in early October, some 4,000 Iraqi Kurdish *peshmerga* troops were pressed into an effort to retake ten surrounding villages, to be aided by accompanying U.S. SOF teams in an advisory role and backstopped by a heavy application of coalition airpower. Secretary Carter billed this looming offensive as a “decisive moment” in Iraq’s hitherto stagnated fight against ISIS.³¹

On October 17, 2016, Gen MacFarland announced the formal start of the Iraq-led offensive to retake Mosul.³² As the only remaining large city in Iraq still occupied by ISIS, the impending battle was portrayed by the respected British news weekly *The Economist* as “the most complex military operation in the country since the American invasion in 2003.”³³ A subsequent review of that epic showdown conducted by the U.S. Army-led Mosul Study Group more aptly depicted the nine-month-long slog as “the first sustained urban operation involving U.S. forces since the 1968 Battle of Hue” in South Vietnam. That assessment described the entrenched resistance in Mosul as “a capable and adaptable hybrid force” consisting of between 3,000 and 5,000 light-infantry ISIS combatants equipped with “significant numbers of heavy machine guns, rocket-propelled grenade launchers, recoilless rifles, mortars, and rockets,” all of which provided the wherewithal for the jihadists to establish “a robust, layered urban defense with coordinated capabilities across multiple domains.”³⁴

During the ISF’s protracted battle to liberate Mosul, precision bombing by coalition aircraft succeeded in sparing most of the eastern portion of the city

from extensive damage to buildings and other infrastructure, and that contribution proved indispensable for allowing successful ISF maneuvering throughout the city's dense urban terrain. Such was not the case, however, in the subsequent liberation of western Mosul, where block-to-block fighting ensued in dense urban canyons and where CJTF-OIR's decision to extirpate any remaining ISIS holdouts in place rather than allow them to escape resulted in unavoidable byproduct damage to civilian homes and other structures throughout that area.³⁵ Viewed in hindsight, however, as the most thorough assessment to date of the air contribution to this epic battle later recalled, based solely on the visual images of the damage wrought by the nine months of bombing and shelling, one might conclude that "the use of airpower ... had been indiscriminate, inaccurate, and ineffective... [Yet] the coalition air campaign to defeat the Islamic State in Mosul was the most tightly controlled, specifically targeted, and precise in history. It permitted Iraqi ground forces to reclaim the city they had abandoned three years earlier and repudiated the most dire predictions about the utility of airpower in dense urban areas."³⁶

After the surprising election of Donald Trump on November 8, 2016, to follow Obama as the next American president, hopes quickly rose that a more determined approach would soon be in store for an escalated final round of CENTCOM's long-stagnated war against ISIS. For his part, Trump stressed that he wanted to implement a more energetic plan that would "utterly destroy" ISIS both in its avowed capital and, more generally, throughout the region.³⁷ By May 2017, in an unmistakable manifestation of that heightened determination, CENTCOM substantially increased the tempo of its daily

air operations as the battle to retake Mosul had begun shifting into high gear. In an interview late that month, Trump's recently appointed Secretary of Defense, former U.S. Marine Corps Gen Mattis, stressed that the administration's intention was now "to accelerate the campaign against ISIS ... [by shifting] from attrition tactics, where we shove them from one position to another in Iraq and Syria, to annihilation tactics, where we surround them."³⁸

By mid-May 2017, with an estimated 7,000 U.S. military personnel now back in Iraq, negotiations between Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi and the U.S. government finally began in quest of a new agreement that would allow for a set number of American troops to remain in Iraq indefinitely as a stabilizing presence to help prevent any chance of a resurgence by ISIS. The following August, coalition aircraft dropped more than 5,000 bombs in all on ISIS aim points in Iraq and Syria, more than during any previous month since OIR first began.³⁹ That was about ten times the number that was dropped during the effort's initial halting month of August 2014.

The SDF's final assault on Raqqa began on June 6, 2017. By the middle of the following month, its combatants had succeeded in taking 40 percent of the city. Roughly concurrently, presidential envoy McGurk directly attributed the coalition's unexpected rate of success in the fight for Raqqa to what he called "the most important change" that had taken place under the new administration's aegis to delegate even more TEA to commanders farther down the chain of command below CJTF-OIR's commander.⁴⁰ At long last, on November 17, 2017, ISF troops repatriated the Iraqi town of Rawa near the Syrian border, freeing up the last remaining urban stronghold held by ISIS in Iraq.

In its own clean-up effort against residual targets of opportunity, CENTCOM's push to pursue any remaining ISIS holdouts in Syria continued with targeted air attacks as deemed appropriate and promising. Coalition air strikes resumed against the last enclaves of ISIS holdouts as they were tracked down and geolocated in Syria's middle Euphrates River valley. By that late point in the now-waning campaign, however, CJTF-OIR's land component leadership concluded on April 30, 2018, that the time had finally come to stand down its headquarters in Baghdad, which it did that day in a deactivation ceremony "signifying the end of major combat operations against ISIS in Iraq."⁴¹

Notable Air War Achievements

Throughout its more than four-year-long evolution, OIR did not stand out as having occasioned any major new advances in the application of airpower. It did, however, as in all previous instances of U.S. and allied air warfare since Desert Storm, see the coalition's aircrews flying their daily sorties, along with their fellow airmen serving as campaign planners and targeteers in AFCENT's CAOC, all working at the very top of their game. The exemplary professionalism that was displayed by all at the execution level since the war's start in August 2014 well reflected the refined force-employment skills that were first developed and assimilated by all three U.S. air services and by their principal coalition partners during the first decade after Vietnam and then further ingrained as their standard operating repertoire ever since.

By the same token, AFCENT's air effort also saw the combat employment of just about every platform and munition that might conceivably have played a useful role in its war against ISIS. Throughout the campaign's course, the various aircraft contributing to the fight included a total

of more than two hundred F-15E, F-16, F/A-18, F-22, AV-8B, A-10, Mirage 2000, Rafale, Super Étendard, Tornado, Typhoon, B-52 and B-1 strikers, along with AC-130 gunships, AH-64 Apache attack helicopters, MQ-1 Predator and MQ-9 Reaper armed remotely piloted aircraft, and supporting aerial surveillance platforms like the U-2 and the E-3C Airborne Warning and Control System aircraft, along with an additional raft of tankers and airlifters that were essential for their combat sustainment.

Whatever else one might say about the many leadership failings that hampered for far too long the way in which the air war was conducted at the campaign level, the war's effectiveness when it came to putting bombs on target accurately was in no way ever compromised by any shortfalls in the available hardware or aircrew proficiency. To note one especially telling case in point here, the coalition's extensive use of the 250-pound satellite-aided GBU-39 small-diameter bomb against such ISIS targets as tactical positions in built-up areas close to noncombatant civilians contributed significantly to the CAOC's entirely apropos claim that the strikes conducted under its aegis were "the most precise and disciplined in the history of aerial warfare."⁴² In one early measure of this laudable performance, as of the end of September 2015, when AFCENT's war against ISIS had completed its first year, U.S. and coalition forces had expended more than 20,000 precision-guided munitions in all against ISIS targets, with that number comprising a full 99 percent of all the munitions that were employed throughout the effort.⁴³

In perhaps its single most notable milestone event, the air war finally saw the combat debut of the U.S. Air Force's fifth-generation F-22 Raptor stealth fighter that first entered line service nearly a decade before in 2005, albeit not in

Figure 4: CAOC floor at al-Udeid Air Base in Qatar

Source: [U.S. Air Force](#)



the air dominance role for which it was initially acquired, but rather as a highly survivable ground-attack platform and one also mounting an unsurpassed suite of sensors for providing enhanced battlespace awareness for all other airborne participants in the execution chain. These first-ever combat sorties flown by the Raptor took place during the initial night of coalition air attacks against ISIS targets in Syria on September 23, 2014, when a four-ship flight was tasked first with destroying an ISIS command post with 1,000-pound satellite-aided GBU-32 Joint Direct Attack Munitions (JDAMs) and then serving as strike escorts for a B-1 attacking its own assigned targets with JDAMs inside Syria's well-defended airspace.⁴⁴

When the F-22s entered Syrian airspace for the first time that night, the acquisition and tracking radar operators of Syria's integrated air defense system (IADS) evidently had no clue that they were there. As one of the Raptor pilots who flew that night later recalled, "it's a little nerve-wracking because stealth is not always 100-percent, so you have to be very cognizant about what's going on around you. But once you're in there, the jet tells me exactly who's looking at

me, and the reality was I didn't have to worry about anybody."⁴⁵ Because of unanticipated delays in getting their mission airborne, the Raptor pilots chose to exercise their supercruise option, climbing to 40,000 ft and then accelerating to Mach 1.5 without using their voraciously fuel-consuming afterburners. In all, what was initially briefed to be an anticipated six-hour night mission ended up lasting nine hours, with a daylight recovery the following morning. It bears mention in passing here that those top-of-the-line fighters were sent to the war zone in the first place *not* with the intent to be used in routine strike operations, but rather as an added source of insurance, given Syria's possession of an unusually sophisticated and capable Soviet-style IADS that American and NATO aircrews had never before encountered in a combat setting. In the end, that hedge proved to have been well-advised but unneeded that first night after Syria's air defenders chose wisely to stand down rather than react when their air sovereignty was first breached by coalition combat aircraft.⁴⁶

Issue in U.S. Leadership and Strategy —

Looking back over the ultimately successful but initially flawed four-year

conduct of OIR, one can identify four manifold planning and implementation errors occasioned by the Obama administration's and CENTCOM's going-in decisions that mainly conspired to make that effort such a needlessly prolonged and costly application of force. Those ill-advised decisions and initial poor strategy choices included (1) the campaign's excessive and pointless gradualism throughout its first two years; (2) its unprecedentedly draconian initial target-attack ROE that insisted for far too long on zero noncombatant casualties at virtually any cost; (3) a fundamental misreading of ISIS by the administration and by CENTCOM as simply a resurrected Iraqi insurgency rather than as an avowed Islamist state in the making, which it actually was; and (4) a U.S. Army-overseen *land*-centric conduct of what was essentially an air-only war for nearly two years, at least on the part of the involved U.S. forces, that insisted for far too long on using American and coalition airpower almost solely to support the moribund and slowly rebuilding ISF in lieu of also conducting concurrent and much-needed independent strategic interdiction attacks against ISIS's most important center-of-gravity targets in both Iraq and Syria from the campaign's first day onward.

Excessive Gradualism to No Useful Purpose

To begin with, any effort to learn from the initial failings of OIR must first recognize that the main reasons for the campaign's slowness to show much progress at first did not emanate from within CENTCOM but rather were occasioned entirely by top-down decree from the Obama White House. As was later recalled by CENTCOM's deputy commander at the time, U.S. Navy Vice Admiral Mark Fox, it was "the Obama administration's reluctance

to get more deeply involved [in Iraq] that was the underlying cause of the campaign's slow and halting activities during the early days of the crisis." Admiral Fox further noted that it was the Obama national security team's "insistence on extremely restrictive rules of engagement to ensure the avoidance of noncombatant fatalities and reluctance to expand the fight into Syria until having been absolutely dragged there by events that accounted for CENTCOM's initial muddled response to the ISIS threat."⁴⁷ Thanks entirely to that prohibitively constraining influence, notwithstanding the many praiseworthy aspects of the air war at the execution level, the main hallmark of Operation Inherent Resolve from a broader campaign perspective was its palpable *lack* of any such resolve for more than a year until finally senior leaders in both the Obama administration and in its successor regime under President Trump—with a commitment to winning rather than just temporizing—took the reins of campaign oversight in Washington.

For one thing, President Obama's refusal at first to allow any U.S. ground troops to return to Iraq after the start of his halting air effort against ISIS in August 2014 instantly ruled out the early availability of the winning approach previously proven in Afghanistan in late 2001 of partnering small American SOF teams and JTACs with indigenous friendly ground forces to locate, identify, validate, and designate enemy targets in enough numbers for the daily air attacks to begin making a significant difference as soon as possible. CENTCOM also was slow to expand its strike operations against ISIS from targets solely in Iraq to more lucrative targets in neighboring Syria, which had been the main locus of the Islamic State's strategic center of gravity from the movement's very first days. It was not until September 23, more than a month

into the slow unfolding of OIR, when the first approved coalition air attacks against ISIS targets in Syria finally took place.

Second, in marked contrast to most of the previous U.S. and NATO air wars since Operation Desert Storm in early 1991, the predominant characteristic of CENTCOM's effort against ISIS throughout President Obama's last two years in office seemed to have been principally a reflexive exercise in day-to-day mindless target servicing in support of no discernible strategic course of action or clearly defined goal. Instead, it largely entailed simply reactive air attacks against pop-up targets of opportunity in ones and twos, such as enemy vehicles and sniper positions, as they were detected by overhead ISR platforms. In effect, in Anthony Cordesman's apt words, such largely reactive target attacks with no apparent broader guiding rhyme or reason succeeded handily in turning "the classic description of pointless tactical activity in counterinsurgency from whack-a-mole to whack-a-sand castle."⁴⁸ By early January 2015, now five months into their effort, the administration and CENTCOM had *still* not marshaled the needed determination to begin targeting in earnest the lucrative oil infrastructure in Iraq and Syria that was providing ISIS with so much fungible wealth on a daily basis to fund its effective and still-expanding recruiting effort. By the first third of that year, now nine months into CENTCOM's bombing, only around 1,900 strike sorties out of more than 7,300 reported to have been flown to date that year, a mere 25 percent of the scheduled combat sortie total, had actually released a munition against an approved ISIS target.

Indeed, the doggedly gradualist and indecisive pace that characterized OIR throughout most of the Obama administration's conduct of it was all too reminiscent of the worst practices of the

Vietnam War that were now being repeated by a successor generation of American leaders who seemed to have forgotten all the hard-earned lessons of warfare and strategy that were first borne out in Desert Storm and later revalidated by subsequent air campaigns, culminating in allied airpower's casebook performance in enabling the takedown of Saddam Hussein's regime in just three weeks in early 2003. One example of that unthinking reversion to Vietnam-era practices was reflected in CENTCOM's persistent resort, in the absence of any more meaningful measures of merit, to such long-discredited metrics of combat performance as the daily numbers of sorties flown, munitions expended, targets struck, and enemy combatants killed (the much-maligned "body count"), when such figures merely indicated the campaign's level of effort expended rather than any extent of actual progress. Another could be seen in the increasingly outspoken allegations from CENTCOM's rank-and-file intelligence analysts after more than a year into the effort that their superiors had repeatedly rewritten their unflattering fact-based assessments so as to spin a more positive portrayal of the campaign's progress up the chain of command.⁴⁹

In the end, it took more than a year of highly constrained and mostly reactive bombing of ISIS targets as they appeared sequentially to overhead ISR platforms and duly met the administration's strict no-civilian-casualties ROE for the White House finally to consider and then approve what the JCS chairman, Gen Dunford, later described as "accelerants" that, he said, would "make a major difference" in the campaign's future performance and progress. Yet only on December 14, 2015, when President Obama visited the Pentagon to be briefed on these and other initiatives, did Secretary Carter later indicate his final

Figure 5: U.S. Air Force F-15E Strike Eagles fly over northern Iraq after conducting the first airstrikes against ISIS in Syria during the night of September 23, 2014

Source: [U.S. Air Force](#)



satisfaction that “we had the complete campaign plan [in hand] and the approval to carry it out.”⁵⁰ That was nearly a year and a half, however, after the start of the administration’s mostly aimless and costly effort against ISIS up to that point.

Overly Restrictive Rules of Engagement

A second and closely related impediment to the air war’s effectiveness, from the bombing’s hesitant start through most of the Obama administration’s subsequent oversight of it, was a uniquely stringent ROE regime imposed by a micromanaging White House that limited the number of targets available for aerial attack each day through its totally unrealistic insistence on *zero* civilian casualties being incurred by any coalition weapon detonation. As a result of that impediment, CENTCOM had far fewer targets eligible for attack each day throughout the first two years of the effort than it had platforms and munitions available to engage them. That fact alone explains why just one out of four scheduled strike sorties flown throughout the effort’s first five months actually dropped bombs on ISIS targets.⁵¹

In fact, these most onerous ROE imposed on CENTCOM by the White House, called the Presidential Policy Guidance, were actually said to have been developed and handed down in 2013, well

before U.S. air operations against ISIS had even formally begun. Those rules were said to have stipulated that any would-be future ISIS target proposed for aerial attack must actually threaten not just American security interests but actual *Americans*. They also must present a “near-certainty” that any such bombing would kill no indigenous noncombatants.⁵² Indeed, they were so restrictive in the target-attack options they allowed that any fair-minded neutral observer could easily be forgiven for concluding that they had been expressly designed to preclude virtually *any* truly meaningful and effective kinetic operations. As the most senior U.S. Army general on the ground overseeing strike operations in Iraq at the campaign’s start later reported in this regard, whenever he might request a specific ROE change to enable a timely attack on a lucrative ISIS target, he “immediately ... encountered almost nothing but pushback from senior headquarters elements. The timid political climate in Washington extended well into the senior military levels... The overarching sentiment was that we ‘shouldn’t even bother trying,’ because no one in Washington wanted U.S. bombs dropping in Iraq again, regardless of the reason, based on the potential perception that we’d be initiating another Iraq war.”⁵³

This inhibiting ROE regime insisted on by the Obama administration, it bears

further stressing, greatly exceeded the requirements formally stipulated by the Law of Armed Conflict, which insists that all reasonable measures be undertaken to avoid causing noncombatant casualties in warfare, but which also specifies that ensuring the lives of innocent civilians instantly becomes the responsibility of any enemy who would willfully use them as human shields. International law also expressly allows for the occasioning of civilian fatalities as unavoidable byproduct harm in combat, even if knowingly caused, should an attack meet the law's reasonable standards of proportionality that require a target's military importance to be deemed high enough to justify the possibility, or even the certainty, of resultant civilian fatalities. Beyond that, as a former U.S. Air Force deputy judge advocate general remarked in this regard, "ROE can carry with them a moral hazard of sorts [of their own] when they operate to prevent a strike that is actually permissible under international humanitarian law.... [Those] ISIS militants who might have been killed if [a proscribed] strike went forward can now live on to commit all kinds of cruelties [against innocent civilians]."⁵⁴

With respect to OIR, however, as one discerning analyst well put it, the highly capable surveillance and strike platforms that were available to CENTCOM in principle throughout the Obama administration's conduct of the effort were "tied up in obsessive platinum-standard target vetting" dictated by White House-mandated ROE that were "without a doubt the most obsessively restrictive of any air campaign ever fought by a U.S. coalition."⁵⁵ In this unduly exacting political and legal environment, allied pilots flying combat missions into Iraq and Syria were routinely required to have their attack requests wend their way up through a maddening gauntlet of clearance wickets before they

could receive final approval to strike a legitimate target. As one experienced U.S. Air Force A-10 pilot complained frankly of this onerous constraint early on in a private e-mail to a friend: "I've never been more frustrated in my career. After thirteen years of the mind-numbing low-intensity conflict in Afghanistan, I've never seen the knife more dull. All the hard lessons learned in Vietnam and fixed during the first Gulf war have been unlearned again. The level of centralized execution, bureaucracy, and politics is staggering... In most cases, unless a general officer can look at a video picture from a UAV [unmanned aerial vehicle] over a satellite link, I cannot get authority to engage... The institutional fear of making a mistake that has crept into the central mindset of the military leadership is endemic. We have not taken the fight to these guys. We haven't targeted their center of gravity in Raqqa. All the roads between Syria and Iraq are still intact with trucks flowing freely. The other night I watched a couple hundred small tanker trucks lined up at an oilfield in ISIS-held northeast Syria... It's not uncommon to wait several hours overhead a suspected target for someone to make a decision to engage or not. It feels like we are simply using the constructs built up in Afghanistan, which was a very limited fight, in the same way here against ISIS, which is a much more sophisticated and numerically greater foe. It's embarrassing."⁵⁶

Regarding this mounting bone of contention among line operators in the campaign, the former Supreme Allied Commander for Europe, U.S. Navy Admiral James Stavridis, helpfully offered an authoritative supporting perspective: "I think it's become abundantly clear that what we're doing is not working, and I think it is time to ramp up a couple of different things.... Number one would be increasing the lethality and frequency

of the bombing... I'm sympathetic to the view that, if we don't have to deploy any more U.S. troops and we can roll back the Islamic State, that would be terrific. But that's not my assessment, and I don't think it's an assessment that is supported by the facts on the ground."⁵⁷ Likewise, regarding CENTCOM's continued insipid level of effort as reflected in its overly constrained air strikes more than a year into the bombing, even Obama's own respected former under secretary of defense for policy, Michele Flournoy, maintained that the administration's still-tepid efforts to counter ISIS continued to "convey a sense of creeping incrementalism ... that simply will not turn the tide given ISIS's size, spread, and momentum."⁵⁸

As yet another case in point here, the institutionally imposed friction that routinely occasioned so many delays in getting timely target-attack approvals sometimes required as many as four to six *weeks* of the CAOC's constant monitoring of a prospective *deliberate* target before any approval to attack it could be elicited. Even in the less burdensome case of requested *dynamic* attacks in response to real-time air support requests from friendly indigenous troops in direct contact with ISIS jihadists, which in the end accounted for around 85 percent of all target attacks in CENTCOM's four-year-long air war against ISIS, any such strike for nearly two years into the effort likewise had to be approved by a brigadier general or someone of even higher rank in the kill chain. That fact led one reporter in September 2016 to conclude that OIR had become "the most tightly managed air campaign in the history of warfare." Commenting, for his part, on this most preclusive hindrance to effective targeting ever experienced in American combat practice, the former air commander for Operation Desert Storm in

1991, retired U.S. Air Force Gen Charles Horner, remarked from the home front with more than a hint of resigned dismay: "It's a very convoluted system for fighting a war. We're fighting with one arm tied behind our back."⁵⁹

A Consequential Misreading of ISIS

When President Obama first ordered a U.S. military response to the mounting scourge of ISIS, a fundamental failing on CENTCOM's part from the very start of its campaign planning was to misunderstand this latest emergent foe as just a resurgence of the same Sunni insurgency that the command had fought, ultimately successfully, in Iraq for nearly a decade rather than duly recognizing it as the very different phenomenon of an avowed state-in-the-making, with all the targetable vulnerabilities of such a distinctly different entity. It naturally followed from that initial incorrect assessment that as the organization tasked with taking on and defeating ISIS, CENTCOM reflexively chose to address it in the same long-habituated way in which it had conducted its previous COIN wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.

By having thus wrongly interpreted the essence of ISIS from its first day onward as that of a reborn insurgency rather than of a fundamentally different embryonic state with distinct and targetable state-like characteristics, CENTCOM stepped out smartly on the wrong foot by violating, from the very outset, one of the most abiding principles of warfare long before articulated by the renowned Prussian strategist Carl von Clausewitz, who stressed the criticality of avoiding the worst possible planning error of confusing the war one is actually in with the war one *believes* one is in or would prefer to be in. As Clausewitz wrote in this regard in his classic opus published posthumously in 1832, "the first [and] most far-reaching

act of judgment that the statesman and commander have to make is to establish the kind of war on which they are embarking, neither mistaking it for, nor trying to turn it into, something that is alien to its nature.”⁶⁰

In fact, by virtue of its observable nature and its openly declared intent to become a thriving Islamist caliphate, ISIS was in no way just another garden-variety insurgency of the sort that its predecessor, al-Qaeda in Iraq, had been during the strife-ridden years before the surge of 2007 that followed the three-week major combat phase of Operation Iraqi Freedom in early 2003. On the contrary, it was a de facto state in gestation that sought the gaining and holding of terrain as an enduring feature of its existence. For example, ISIS possessed and fought with heavy weapons and other high-end military equipment like the U.S.-made M1A1 Abrams tanks that it had expropriated from the imploded post-Saddam Iraqi army. It also had assimilated

and made effective use of sophisticated warfighting skills from disaffected units of that same failed Iraqi army. Although it lacked an air arm and high-technology air defenses, it fought ably otherwise on behalf of an ideologically driven movement that was, to all intents and purposes, a vibrant state in the making.

In clear contrast to CENTCOM’s faulty assumption from the campaign’s start that ISIS was just a re-embodiment of the earlier Iraqi insurgency that it had fought to a standstill not so many years before, a central reality of this latest emergent threat was that “what looked like a military offensive by a ragtag army of ISIS irregulars,” as defense writer James Kitfield later observed, “was actually the result of an unprecedented alliance between Salafi jihadists and former Sunni Ba’athist military officers whose networks reached deep into corrupted Iraqi Security Forces,” and with ISIS “exercising state-like dominion over much territory in



Figure 6: U.S. Coalition Intelligence Fusion Cell member reviews a map at the CAOC at al-Udeid Air Base, Qatar in 2016. The CIFIC plans, coordinates, develops, and disseminates information among international partners and divisions within the CAOC

Source: [U.S. Air Force](#)

Iraq and Syria, with all its economic and energy resources.”⁶¹ Writing in a similar vein, Harvard University’s Professor Stephen Walt noted how ISIS “has ... sought to build the rudiments of a genuine state in the territory it controls” and that although it calls itself a caliphate, “a territorial state is what its leaders are [actually] running.” He then quoted approvingly a German journalist, Jürgen Todenhöfer, who rightly noted in 2014 that “ISIS is a country now.” He also said, equally correctly, that it “has proved surprisingly capable at providing security and basic services in its territory ... and fighting on the ground against weak opponents.”⁶²

Still another perceptive analyst noted how so many outside observers “assume that the current challenge [posed by ISIS] is simply to refocus Washington’s now-formidable counterterrorism apparatus on a new target,” when in fact “ISIS is not al-Qaeda” or any other manifestation of a classic insurgency. Taking sharp issue with Obama’s ill-informed passing remark that ISIS is “a terrorist organization, pure and simple,” this analyst countered in early 2015 that the movement “boasts some 30,000 fighters, holds territory in both Iraq and Syria, maintains extensive military capabilities, controls lines of communication, funds itself, and engages in sophisticated military operations.” She, therefore, concluded, “If ISIS is purely and simply anything, it is a pseudo-state led by a conventional army. And that is why the counterterrorism and counterinsurgency strategies that greatly diminished the threat from al-Qaeda will not work against ISIS.”⁶³

Yet CENTCOM’s U.S. Army leaders, inured as they had become to a decade’s worth of slow-motion COIN warfare in Iraq and Afghanistan, naturally chose instead to revert to their long-habituated ways by interpreting and engaging ISIS as simply a resurrection of the former insurgency that

they had been most acclimated to fighting for nearly ten years. On this count, U.S. Air Force Maj Gen Charles Moore, Jr., who had served as a senior director in the U.S. Office of Security Cooperation in Baghdad from the time ISIS first arose through the initial months of OIR’s sporadic and ineffective bombing, later recalled that CENTCOM’s U.S. Army leadership assessed this latest problem they had inherited as simply “a continuation of the wars they grew up fighting in Iraq and Afghanistan, when in fact [the operational and strategic challenge posed by ISIS] was *vastly* different. And they didn’t listen to airmen who were trying to make that case.”⁶⁴

In the end, this corporate failure on CENTCOM’s part to characterize the enemy and the combat challenge it presented most correctly from OIR’s very start had far-reaching adverse consequences for the ultimate effectiveness of its would-be air war. A related misjudgment on the Obama administration’s and CENTCOM’s part in their selection and prioritization of enemy targets selected for attack was their chosen approach to undo ISIS’s gains in Iraq *before* turning to the jihadist movement’s more vital strategic heartland that had taken root in Syria after the withdrawal of the last remaining U.S. troops from Iraq at the end of 2011, rather than taking on both target sets and strategic objectives with equal determination from the campaign’s first moments onward.

To be sure, in all fairness to the intrinsic reasonableness and likely logic behind the Iraq-first emphasis that eventually drove CENTCOM’s prioritization of its aerial targeting in OIR, it bears recognizing that both its leaders and the most senior civilian security officials in the Obama administration no doubt saw the indispensability of rebuilding the confidence and capacity of the ISF as quickly as possible if there was to

be any prospect for achieving longer-term stability in the region. However, one can also fairly suggest that by having planned and overseen a land-centric campaign aimed principally at rebuilding the badly atrophied ISF as the first order of business, and by having misapplied their substantial ISR and strike assets primarily as wholly dedicated air support for that still mostly noncombat-ready Iraqi ground force in lieu of going after ISIS's throat concurrently in both Iraq *and* Syria with a more air-centric assault on its most vital strategic vulnerabilities, CENTCOM's U.S. Army leaders were fighting the wrong war.

A Flawed Command Arrangement at the Campaign's Start

Even with all due allowance for the constraints imposed by President Obama and by his principal subordinates in the White House that so badly hampered CENTCOM's freedom of action when the campaign first began, that organization's long-ingrained leadership make-up and operational predilections also figured prominently when it came to generating the command's ultimately chosen response to the rise of ISIS. As one U.S. Air Force colonel aptly recalled in this regard, "it would be an understatement to say that there was a very Army-centric dose of operational art [prevalent at CENTCOM's headquarters] in the summer of 2014." That fact, he remarked, worked mightily "to constrain any semblance of an interdiction campaign" emerging as a part of that command's initial combat response.⁶⁵ In an especially compelling testament to that operational outlook when it came to their initial tasking to take on ISIS, as already noted above, CENTCOM's leaders by the natural force of habit misread the jihadist movement as simply a regenerated insurgency of the sort that they had

previously fought throughout the preceding decade. That flawed assessment naturally drove them to pursue an inappropriate COIN strategy and to accede to equally inappropriate and inhibiting ROE quite independently of the top-down constraints insisted on by Obama's White House.

Those initial planning missteps, however, were themselves natural results of an even more suboptimal decision by CENTCOM's commander, U.S. Army Gen Lloyd Austin III, namely, his having assigned a three-star *infantry* general to oversee the first round of fighting against ISIS, even though he surely knew that any such effort would entail air-only operations for a year or more, at least on the part of any involved U.S. combat forces. To be sure, as Admiral Fox later pointed out, CENTCOM's nominally co-equal three-star *air* component commander at the time had a full enough plate already providing needed air support to the ongoing war in Afghanistan, whereas the U.S. Army general ultimately tapped to command OIR "had a joint task force headquarters already set up in Kuwait and had no combat responsibilities in Afghanistan."⁶⁶ Yet if there ever was a nascent challenge in CENTCOM's area of responsibility that begged for an air-centric solution, at least while ISIS was still gaining strength and when the moribund ISF's fighting units were nowhere near ready to take on the jihadist movement, it was at the start of OIR in mid-August 2014 and throughout the campaign's first year thereafter.

Nevertheless, Gen Austin and his eventually chosen subordinate CJTF-OIR commander, U.S. Army Lt Gen James Terry, both proceeded to approach their impending effort instead as a *land* war, with CENTCOM's air component relegated solely to providing on-call support to a still only anticipated land counteroffensive yet to

Figure 7: An airman maneuvers a boom to refuel an Air Force F-22 Raptor during a night mission over Iraq in 2018 in support of Operation Inherent Resolve

Source: [U.S. Air Force](#)



come. In a revealing *post hoc* confirmation of that largely unheeded fact of life on the ground in Iraq, when Gen Austin finally presented his envisioned construct for such a land campaign to Secretary of Defense Carter six months later for the latter's approval, Carter immediately saw that the plan "was entirely unrealistic at that time" because it "relied on Iraqi army formations that barely existed on paper... Building the kind of Iraqi force that could retake Mosul would ultimately take the better part of a year."⁶⁷

Looking at the OIR experience in hindsight, one can suggest with reasonable confidence that an alternative approach that made better use of CENTCOM's fighting components in a more productive flow plan might have yielded the desired outcome both more quickly and at a substantially lower cost in overall sorties flown, expensive munitions used against often meaningless targets, and innocent Iraqi and Syrian noncombatant lives lost along the way. Such a more purposeful response would have begun by CENTCOM's having first understood the adversary for what it actually was as a self-avowed embryonic state, conducted the necessary prior target system analyses in both Iraq and Syria that would

be essential for underwriting the campaign's strikes against the enemy's greatest vulnerabilities, assigned a subordinate CJTF commander for OIR whose component was best suited for conducting the campaign's initial operations, and then amended that command structure's leadership as deemed most appropriate once the U.S. role in the campaign shifted from an air-only counteroffensive to overseeing a more truly joint and combined air-land campaign.⁶⁸ Such a more promising approach along those lines would have leveraged CENTCOM's air component as the principal, and hence *supported*, force element at the campaign's start, after which coalition air would then have been swung to a more subordinate and *supporting* role under a CJTF ground commander once U.S. and allied SOF teams began working with indigenous Iraqi and Syrian ground troops in a final land-centric push to defeat the enemy once and for all.

Indeed, OIR's second assigned air component commander, Gen Brown, later remarked on that important point that at least during the campaign's initial stages, as the CJTF's land component was mainly focused on rebuilding the ISF, CENTCOM's air commander "could and

probably should have been designated as OIR's supported commander, with an eventual handover of CJTF-OIR to the most senior ground general once sustained offensive land operations were set to begin." Such an alternative approach, he suggested, "would have had the right leadership and expertise in charge more properly aligned with the initial scheme of the campaign."⁶⁹ A similar sentiment was offered by a U.S. Air Force F-16 pilot who flew in two successive rotations in OIR during its largely ineffectual opening round. This airman observed insightfully that what the U.S. Army and U.S. Air Force leaderships within CENTCOM had *both* failed to recognize in adequate time was "that ISIS was a proto-state requiring more than just support to the indigenous ground maneuver elements. It also required a distinct and separate aerial bombing campaign on strategic targets and air interdiction, and this needed to happen right away while the coalition was still gestating. That, in turn, meant duly supporting the embattled Iraqis and keeping that figurative ship afloat while concurrently doing our utmost to hurt ISIS's warfighting capability with a sustained air campaign. Yet we did the former but not the latter during OIR's pivotal first two years in late 2014 and 2015. Stated another way, at a time when the campaign should have been mainly air-centric, it wasn't. Its construction from 2016 onward was probably correct. But its construct at the beginning was flawed."⁷⁰

On this important count, even retired U.S. Army Colonel Peter Mansoor, who had served as a close advisor to U.S. Army Gen David Petraeus in Iraq during the eventually successful surge of 2007, suggested that "if this [effort against ISIS] was going to be just an air campaign [which it most definitely was for U.S. forces during its first two years], it would have made much more sense to have an Air Force officer in Baghdad and

have him lead the charge."⁷¹ With such more appropriate leadership in place and charged with plotting a course for what would come next, any strategically literate three-star airman as CJTF commander would have had every incentive and opportunity to mobilize the vast intelligence resources at his disposal to take the fullest possible measure of ISIS and to seek at least the needed initial target system development *before* committing to any ensuing plan for the war's opening round.

In that regard, however, as another former U.S. Air Force three-star recalled from his own past experience, "all too often during the planning and execution of joint air, ground and maritime operations, military intelligence directors around the world have no clue about the precision capabilities and lethality offered by contemporary American airpower." Worse yet, he added, "they typically leverage the targeting information they gather and assess in a way calculated to support the fighting forces they are most familiar with. If they have primarily ground-centric backgrounds, they will naturally seek to underwrite ground-centric strategies for their bosses that may limit, or even prevent entirely, the fullest exploitation of the most effective weapons available to them."⁷² In light of that fact, it would almost surely have required an experienced airman as CJTF-OIR's commander at least during the campaign's first year in order for his intelligence suppliers to have been tasked with providing the kinds of targeting information that would have made the most of the air-deliverable strike options available to him.

Interestingly enough with regard to that arguably more promising alternative, OIR's first deputy air component commander, U.S. Air Force Lt Gen Jeffrey Lofgren, later recalled that the prospective command arrangements

for the coming campaign at the start of planning for it were “hotly debated with the CENTCOM commander over several weeks.” Although he did not indicate when that contentious back-and-forth first began, who its main protagonists were, and what spectrum of concerns it addressed, the simple fact that the debate was both heated and protracted would seem to suggest that it centered, among other possible issues, on the ultimate question of whether the strategy for the war’s opening round should be land-centric or air-centric and, directly related to that question, whether the CJTF for the coming fight should be commanded at the outset by an Army general or by an airman. Lt Gen Lofgren further acknowledged that “the Air Force was asked to provide manpower to the JTF and did not do so initially, which [ultimately] shaped the early constructs [for the campaign].” In the end, he recalled, “the CENTCOM commander’s going with the choice of ARCENT [U.S. Army Central Command to plan and oversee it] was driven more by comfort [on Gen Austin’s part] and the fact that the air component was not postured to be able to execute the CJTF mission.”⁷³

Yet there was no reason in principle why CENTCOM’s air component commander could not have been tasked with assuming initial oversight of at least the air portion of the impending campaign and then laying down the essentials for a more appropriate starting course of action both easily and seamlessly within the framework of the existing CJTF structure in Kuwait. Ultimately, what should have mattered most was not the “command and subordinate staff that had [previously] worked and trained together” and that Gen Austin was most “comfortable” with, but rather what class of expertise and associated skill set would be best suited for the commander ultimately tapped to plan and lead a successful campaign against

the unique challenge that ISIS presented at least at the start of OIR.⁷⁴ Such an alternative approach, as was suggested by retired U.S. Air Force Lt Gen David Deptula, would have included “concurrent and sustained attacks against ISIS’s most vital center of gravity in Syria,” as well as a more overarching and guiding concept of operations “designed to fully exploit the strategic potential offered by U.S. and coalition airpower to eradicate the declared Islamist caliphate as quickly as possible.” The absence of any such alternative in CENTCOM’s initial options planning, Lt Gen Deptula concluded, “occurred in part because its air component, by all outward signs, did not effectively argue for such a more promising course of action.”⁷⁵

Eventual Steps Toward a More Effective CJTF

Fortunately for the ultimate success of OIR, its U.S. Army-led headquarters by mid-2016 and thereafter, at long last having included an uninterrupted succession of experienced two-star U.S. Air Force fighter-pilot generals in the key position of deputy commander for operations and intelligence, finally developed a smoothly running battle rhythm in which CENTCOM’s air component figured both centrally and effectively as the sole U.S. kinetic contribution to an overall ground-centric war plan. As the third of those senior American airmen assigned to that pivotal role, Maj Gen Dirk Smith, later recalled, “Given the great work done by [his U.S. Air Force predecessors, Maj Gens] Peter Gersten and Scott Kindsvater, when I stepped into the position, I felt like I was very empowered by the CJTF commander ... to ensure that ‘airmindedness’ could be in every CJTF senior leader discussion. It also allowed me to provide detailed understanding of issues from the CJTF and subordinate



Figure 8: This image taken from an overhead sensor platform shows the effects in real time of a precision attack by coalition aircraft on a trio of approved ISIS aim points after preplanned strikes against such truly lucrative targets were finally approved

Source: [U.S. Air Force](#)

land component commanders' perspective to the [air component commander and his deputy]."⁷⁶

That eventually well-tuned integration of U.S. and coalition airpower as the lead player in OIR's effort against ISIS, however, was anything but the accepted norm during the campaign's first year. As was later explained by Maj Gen Moore, who had been the most senior U.S. airman in Baghdad during the war's initial months by virtue of his posting in the Office of Security Cooperation in Iraq, his organization engaged on a daily basis with CENTCOM, including with all of its subordinate components and with the Iraqi government. Eventually, he recalled, by around the start of 2015, the U.S. Air Force sent Brig Gen John Cherrey, a combat-seasoned A-10 pilot, to OIR's forward headquarters in Kuwait to help plan and direct air operations in its still slowly developing war against ISIS.

For at least the campaign's first five months, however, CJTF-OIR had *no* formal air representation in its command section. Yet during those same first few months, the *only* American combat operations being conducted against ISIS were from the air, with OIR's U.S. Army personnel focused solely on rebuilding what had been lost from

the fragile ISF following President Obama's premature withdrawal of all U.S. forces from Iraq in 2012. That meant that CENTCOM's only component actually engaged in combat operations against ISIS was not in command of those operations. In that plainly dysfunctional situation from an ideal joint-service perspective, CJTF-OIR's first commander, U.S. Army Lt Gen Terry, would brief the daily air operations flow via video-conference from Kuwait to CENTCOM's commander, Gen Austin, sitting in his headquarters back in Tampa, Florida. As Maj Gen Moore later recalled, in that odd briefing arrangement, CENTCOM's air component commander, Lt Gen John Hesterman III, participating from the CAOC in Qatar, "was often left with little to say when it was his turn, which usually occurred last."⁷⁷

Indeed, it was not until May 2015, nearly a year into the campaign, when Maj Gen Gersten arrived in position as CJTF-OIR's assigned deputy commander for operations and intelligence, thereby finally providing direct senior air representation on Lt Gen Terry's staff for the first time since the campaign began. In light of that long-delayed move to insert a senior air presence in the CJTF's command section, it should hardly be surprising that the air contribution to CENTCOM's war against ISIS was so ineffectual throughout its first year when it came to weakening ISIS in its most vital strategic center. At a minimum, as the head of CJTF-OIR's Joint Air Component Coordination Element toward the campaign's endgame, U.S. Air Force Maj Gen Andrew Croft, later remarked in this regard: "We [in the air component] clearly should have put an airman ... into the CJTF upper-echelon staff earlier."⁷⁸

Militating even further against much of a chance of CENTCOM's having arrived at a more appropriately focused approach toward addressing the ISIS challenge during the air war's first year, "the CJTF for OIR was more

accurately a U.S. Army Corps headquarters,” as the British Royal Air Force’s air contingent commander later recalled, “and the U.S. Army was more comfortable with Iraq than [with] Syria because of its previous years there—perhaps an explanation for [its] delays in executing an effective plan for Syria.” To make matters worse yet, he added, with no formal air representation in the subordinate command structure that CENTCOM had cobbled together for Inherent Resolve for at least the campaign’s first five months, “air was rarely embedded early in CJTF planning and had to fight valiantly to be heard.”⁷⁹

As the only sure-fire antidote for heading off and preventing such an adverse circumstance from taking root in future campaign planning from its very start, the overseer of CENTCOM’s casebook air offensive that largely occasioned the successful outcome of Operation Desert Storm, Gen Horner, recently stressed the absolute criticality for airmen in any joint warfighting headquarters to always “think ahead of their non-air-minded counterparts and superiors, lead them to understand that they are working the problem as those ground-oriented players view it,” and persuade the latter whenever appropriate that “there is a better way.”⁸⁰ Fortunately, such a response eventually gained effective traction within CENTCOM’s air component during OIR and helped materially to produce the campaign’s winning result in the end. But it was needlessly a year or more late in coming.

Also, regarding the air component’s eventual effort to heighten the airpower focus within CJTF-OIR, the campaign’s second successive air component commander, Gen Brown, almost as his first order of business after having reported aboard in that position moved his Air Support Operations Center from collocation with CJTF-OIR’s land component headquartered in Baghdad,

which was exclusively Iraq-focused, to the command’s principal headquarters in Kuwait so as to achieve a broader airpower focus across that command’s entire area of regard, most notably including in Syria as well as in Iraq. As to his underlying rationale for that important move, Gen Brown later recalled: “I wanted to conduct more deliberate strikes in Syria to support the future close fight in Iraq. I often shared with my staff that although Iraq may be first in priority, it was second on my playlist when it came to where I wanted to apply airpower.”⁸¹ That perspective and intention, one can fairly say in hindsight, should have been a key part of CJTF-OIR’s campaign approach from the very start.

The Opportunity Costs of OIR’s Initial Miscues

Viewed in hindsight, the pronounced shortfall in early combat payoff yielded by the desultory air war against ISIS that ensued over Iraq and Syria for more than a year after its start in early August 2014 was a predictable result of CENTCOM’s suboptimal strategy choice from the campaign’s first moments onward. After what Secretary Carter later aptly characterized as CENTCOM’s “ad hoc launch” of its initially flawed war plan, the vast oil reserves in Iraq and Syria that had been controlled and steadily exploited by ISIS for copious financial gain were not targeted and struck until a full fifteen months later, offering yet another testament to the downside costs of the misguided gradualism and inappropriate COIN focus of the Obama administration’s and CENTCOM’s initial approach to their counter-ISIS effort.⁸²

A more promising and productive approach like the one suggested above would have concentrated instead on interdicting ISIS’s flow of oil and other supplies from

the campaign's first moments onward rather than wasting valuable ISR sorties and costly precision-guided munitions in an incorrectly prioritized ground-support effort flown over Iraq's cities mainly to satisfy the advise-and-assist desires of U.S. Army generals who commanded *no* troops actually involved in the fighting. Had such a more goal-maximizing approach been duly pursued instead by CJTF-OIR, the vast majority of CENTCOM's ISR operations at the campaign's start would have been conducted not over Iraqi urban areas and front lines but, as Maj Gen Moore well put it, "across the border in Syria [and] on the border in the Anbar desert building situation awareness for our interdiction attacks. Imagine the Ho Chi Minh trail but in a desert!"⁸³

In this regard, Lt Gen Deptula suggested at the end of 2017 that had CENTCOM pursued a more effective plan that understood ISIS for what it actually was from the very start and duly engaged it as such, "we could have achieved our objectives through the use of overwhelming airpower in three months, not in three years."⁸⁴ Yet even if just three months might, in the end, have fallen well short of a more realistic length of time that a more fitting approach would most likely have needed actually to bring ISIS to heel, such a better-focused strategy could still have achieved that desired result in considerably less time than the four years that CENTCOM's campaign ultimately took to do the job. As the chief of staff for CENTCOM's air component at the time OIR first got started, U.S. Air Force Maj Gen Charles Corcoran, later recalled on this critical count, "when we shifted from "advise [and] assist to ... advise, assist, *accompany and enable*, things changed. When our [SOF teams and JTACs] on the ground were able to truly support the main effort, we really started rolling back

the enemy." In that regard, the Obama administration's eventual consent to allow U.S. military personnel to embed themselves with ISF troops on the front lines in such a capacity was a major contributor to many of the latter's subsequent successes on the ground. What really made the crucial difference toward finally bringing ISIS to its knees, however, was the change in the air war's broader vector and character that was only truly formalized by the Trump administration's ramped-up effort. As Gen Corcoran well put it, "once we unleashed airpower on ISIS in a strategic fashion, going after their financing, command and control, [and] leadership rather than just using it for close air support [of indigenous friendly ground troops], the overall campaign advanced rapidly."⁸⁵

Conclusion

In the end, despite its slow and ineffectual start, OIR turned out to have been another successful exercise in joint and combined force employment in which U.S. and coalition airpower ultimately overwhelmed ISIS with an invincible monopoly of asymmetric aerial firepower, thereby ensuring that eventually well-endowed and highly motivated Iraqi and anti-regime Syrian ground troops, supported by U.S. SOF teams and JTACs, would ultimately crush the once-formidable jihadist movement. That performance offered a compelling testament to the intrinsic leverage of today's American air posture in all services once freed from the shackles imposed by flawed initial leadership directives that misunderstood the enemy as a reborn Iraqi insurgency and that wrongly insisted on ROE meant for a different kind of war.

In looking back over the ultimately successful experience of OIR, however, one must first never lose sight of the overarching fact, as a *Wall Street Journal* editorial rightly remarked in reflecting on that more than

Figure 9: A U.S. Air Force C-130H Hercules at al-Udeid Air Base, Qatar, prepares for a combat airdrop mission in support of OIR's Operation Roundup in June, 2018

Source: [U.S. Air Force](#)



four-year-long effort, that the prolonged and costly campaign “would not have been needed [in the first place] if the Obama administration hadn’t left the region prematurely.”⁸⁶ On that important count, after the last remaining ISIS diehards were driven out of their final redoubt in the Syrian town of Baghouz in late March 2019, CENTCOM’s commander at the time, U.S. Army Gen Joseph Votel, cited the billions of American dollars spent and “tens of thousands” of allied fighters’ lives lost in that campaign and added, in a candid concluding reflection on it all: “I think that the lesson learned from that is we really have to be very careful when we step away from our interests, and if we try to do it too quickly—that’s the cost.”⁸⁷

After duly acknowledging that eminently avoidable occasioning failure, one must frankly concede that there was nothing wrong in principle with President Obama’s declared starting-out goal of “degrading and ultimately defeating” ISIS. Yet there was arguably *everything* wrong with the way in which both his administration and CENTCOM first pursued that worthy objective once the actual planning for their initial course of action got underway. To recapitulate the point that matters most here, CENTCOM

should have begun its planning after having been tasked by the White House in early August 2014 to take on ISIS by first sizing up and understanding the movement for what it actually was and then by viewing it—and by aggressively engaging it—as a would-be embryonic state, not as a resurrected Islamist insurgency, which it clearly was not by any relevant evaluative criteria. For their part, Obama’s security advisers should also have willingly acceded to more permissive ROE for the initial enemy target attacks that would have been essential in order to make such a more appropriate strategy work.

A related misstep in CENTCOM’s initial goal-setting was its decision to secure Iraq first by devoting most of its daily air sorties toward providing exclusive standby “support” to a still not entirely combat-ready ISF instead of concurrently sending them also against the heart of ISIS’s assets in Raqqa and elsewhere in Syria with the needed ISR backing immediately after having provided relief to the beleaguered civilian populace in northern Iraq in early August 2014. Such a more strategically sensible approach offering greater promise of earlier campaign returns should have begun by targeting ISIS’s highly leveraged

contraband oil infrastructure and exposed lines of communication from OIR's very start.

As a direct result of those flawed initial strategy choices, after more than two years of sustained but greatly hampered aerial force employment, U.S. and coalition airpower had *still* not been put to a full and proper test as CENTCOM failed to undermine the continued livelihood of the would-be caliphate by applying its fullest potential toward achieving truly outcome-determining gains. Instead, by resorting to half-measures in support of no recognizable strategy or clearly established campaign timetable and endstate, the Obama administration and CENTCOM systematically squandered the overwhelming airpower advantage that the United States had steadily built up ever since the American combat role in Vietnam ended in early 1973.⁸⁸ Worse yet, their persistent belief for months on end that such nonproductive pinprick attacks would suffice allowed the nation's single greatest combat edge, which had amassed a proven record of effectiveness going back to Operation Desert Storm in 1991, to receive an undeserved bad rap in the eyes of many, as was well attested by all who continued to insist wrongly throughout the campaign's first year that airpower in a leading combat role could not offer an effective answer to the challenge at hand.

Finally, there were the incalculable but monumental human costs that were imposed by the war's overly prolonged and pointless early incrementalism. Without seeking here to provide even a rough estimate of the number of innocent Iraqis and Syrians who were killed or wounded throughout the more than four-year-long campaign, the anemic start that President Obama insisted on at the effort's outset and sustained with no truly consequential escalation for two more years produced millions of displaced

Iraqi and Syrian civilians and caused a profusion of noncombatant fatalities in both countries, most of them at the hands of ruthless ISIS marauders rather than as the result of any errant coalition bombs. Fortunately, on the plus side, only 14 U.S. military personnel lost their lives in direct or supporting combat action against ISIS since kinetic operations began in Iraq and Syria in August and September 2014, respectively.

In all, from an overall strategic perspective, CENTCOM's ultimately successful but also needlessly prolonged Operation Inherent Resolve was oxymoronic in both concept and execution throughout its first two largely ineffectual years. Fortunately, however, the campaign did achieve its avowed goal in the end when coalition airpower, in concert with effective indigenous anti-ISIS ground troops in Iraq and Syria and enabled, at long last, by embedded American SOF teams and JTACs, finally reduced the former ISIS behemoth to just a few remaining pockets of isolated resistance in both countries. As CENTCOM's third air component commander for OIR, U.S. Air Force Gen Jeffrey Harrigian, later explained that accomplishment in hindsight, the coalition's campaign to destroy ISIS ultimately turned on "ever-present coalition air forces ... [working with] local partners who were supported by a small footprint of coalition conventional and special operations ground troops," in much the same way that CENTCOM had successfully conducted the far briefer major combat phase of Operation Enduring Freedom in Afghanistan from early October through mid-December 2001.⁸⁹

In that respect, the OIR experience also reminded us once again—or at least should have so reminded us—that even the most capable air posture imaginable can never be more effective than the strategy it seeks to underwrite. In this regard, the late renowned strategist Colin Gray summed up this bottom-line dictum of war perfectly

Figure 10: Brig Gen Charles S. Corcoran, outgoing 380th Air Expeditionary Wing commander, passes the 380 AEW guidon to Lt Gen Jeffrey L. Harrigian, U.S. Air Forces Central Command commander in 2017

Source: [U.S. Air Force](#)



when he wrote more than a decade before that for airpower’s inherent advantage “to secure strategic results of value, it must serve a national and overall military strategy that is feasible, coherent, and politically sensible. If

these basic requirements are not met, [then] airpower, no matter how impeccably applied tactically and operationally, will be employed as a waste of life, taxes, and, frankly, trust between the sharp end of [a nation’s] spear and its shaft.” Gray added that a nation’s overall campaign strategy could be so dysfunctional that it “cannot be rescued from defeat by a dominant airpower, no matter how that airpower is employed.”⁹⁰ That was precisely the situation that was created by the Obama administration’s and CENTCOM’s entirely preventable underemployment of U.S. and coalition air forces for nearly two years until the effort was finally rescued by ensuing leadership decisions that padlocked unerringly on the campaign’s most overarching goal and applied the right strategy and force mix toward achieving it as quickly as possible. *This* is the ultimate campaign teaching from Operation Inherent Resolve that we should all take the greatest care never to forget. ☪

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About the Author

Benjamin S. Lambeth is a nonresident Senior Fellow with the Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, a position he assumed in 2011 following a 37-year career as a Senior Research Associate at the RAND Corporation. A long-time specialist in international security affairs and air warfare, he holds a doctorate in political science from Harvard University and served previously in the Office of National Estimates at the Central Intelligence Agency. Also an experienced civil-rated pilot, he has flown or flown in more than 40 different combat aircraft types with the U.S. Air Force, Navy, Marine Corps, and eight foreign air forces worldwide since 1976. In 2002, he was elected an honorary member of the Order of Daedalians, the national fraternity of U.S. military pilots. He also attended the U.S. Air Force's week-long Combined Force Air Component Commander (CFACC) Course at Maxwell AFB, Alabama. Among his many previous books and other writings on air warfare, he is the author of *The Transformation of American Air Power* (Cornell University Press, 2000) and *The Unseen War: Allied Air Power in the Takedown of Saddam Hussein* (Naval Institute Press, 2013).

