

Book Review

Airpower in the War Against ISIS

By Benjamin S. Lambeth



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Reviewed by Dr Christina Goulter

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Biography: Dr Christina Goulter is Reader in Military History and Air Power and Co-Director at the Sir Michael Howard Centre for the History of War, King's College London. She was formerly Associate Professor of Strategy at the US Naval War College, Rhode Island. Her publications include *A Forgotten Offensive: Royal Air Force Coastal Command's Anti-Shipping Campaign, 1940-45* and other publications on historical and current aerospace subjects and counter-insurgency. She contributed to the RAND study, *Precision and Purpose: Airpower in the Libyan Civil War* (2015), and *Political Rationale and International Consequences of the War in Libya* (Oxford University Press, 2016). She is Fellow of the Royal Aeronautical Society.

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Introduction

This is the first comprehensive study of the US and coalition air attacks on Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) under the mantle of Operation Inherent Resolve, which ran from 2014-19. The nature of the US withdrawal from Iraq in 2011 left a power vacuum from which various actors sought to take advantage. The Sunni-Shia enmity deepened as Iran continued to exercise influence in Iraq, and the Iraqi Sunni heartland provided fertile ground for an uprising and the resuscitation of hardline Islamist groups. The so-called 'Arab Spring' occurring at the same time in the Middle East and North Africa added more fuel to the fire. Anti-regime protests in Syria facilitated the revitalisation of Al-Qaeda (AQ) remnants in that country, many of whom were originally part of AQ Iraq, and these morphed into ISIS. Lambeth's book demonstrates very powerfully how US Central Command's (CENTCOM) initial assessment of ISIS as a new insurgency meant that

valuable time was lost in the first two years of the campaign by treating the 'symptoms of the disease' through a tactical and reactive posture rather than identifying ISIS as a state in the making and applying appropriate strategic effect air power.

The book begins with a very useful outline of the political rationale for Operation Inherent Resolve and the employment of air power as the main instrument, the operational constraints imposed upon CENTCOM under the Obama Presidency, and the more robust approach adopted by the subsequent administration. However, CENTCOM itself does not escape criticism. Lambeth makes the point that most of its army centric planning saw air power as a purely supporting component and ignored much of the advice offered by USAF seniors who drew on the latest intelligence assessments, suggesting that ISIS was developing into more of a state-like entity than an insurgency. Although Lambeth does put blame squarely on the Obama administration for the growth of ISIS because of the precipitate withdrawal of US forces from Iraq, he acknowledges the fact that President Obama did eventually authorise strategic targeting in 2015, including strikes on I.S. Command and Control in Raqqa, ISIS key leadership (including Abu Mohammad Al-Adnani, the chief ISIS recruiter, propagandist and coordinator of terrorist operations, who was killed in August 2016), and various oil installations taken over by the group, which were providing a major revenue stream and making ISIS one of the world's 'wealthiest and most financially sophisticated terrorist organisations' (p. 180). Lambeth acknowledges the key role played by USAF Lieutenant General Charles Brown, who took over as the Combined Force Air Component Commander in June 2015. General Brown convinced CENTCOM that air power had to be applied to strategic targets as well as undertaking Air Interdiction and Close Air Support, and he was instrumental in re-energising the 'complex art' of air campaigning after a decade of servicing Land's tactical air support requirements.

Among the most interesting facts highlighted in the book is the way ISIS morphed and adapted to the air power threat they faced. ISIS demonstrated evidence of a sophisticated Research and Development capability, and this was particularly evident in its use of small drones for surveillance and targeting. Reinforcing the point that ISIS saw itself as a state in the making was its rapid creation of more traditional looking army structures (brigades, squadrons, companies, etc. with dedicated intelligence support). It may have been worth making the observation that this was no coincidence, as many of the Sunni insurgents who rematerialized in ISIS were former members of the Iraqi defence and security apparatus. Even more worrying for the US and her coalition partners was the indication that ISIS was intent on using chemical and possibly radiological weapons. These fears were not unfounded. Saddam's regime had retained precursor chemicals and the expertise to rebuild a significant Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD) programme by the time of the 2003 coalition invasion. Therefore, among the strategic targeting undertaken during Operation Inherent Resolve were attacks on chemical production and storage installations.

One of the most interesting chapters in the book, however, deals with the Russian intervention in September 2015. Outside of intelligence circles, the extent of Russian involvement in support

of the Syrian regime was not fully understood. The Russians deployed 32 Su-24s, Su-25s and Su-34 ground attack aircraft, as well as Mi-24 attack helicopters, several Surface-to-Air Missile (SAM) batteries and T-90 tanks, all supported by over 2,000 Russian personnel. They brought with them their own Integrated Air Defence System (IADS), which dominated western Syria, and the problem for US and other coalition partners was how to develop the mechanisms for airspace deconfliction. It was soon evident that the Russians were about to engage in their own combat operations, but Russian aircraft were often utilising the same airspace as US and coalition aircraft. To make matters even worse, the Russians had much more relaxed Rules of Engagement (ROEs) and were using mainly unguided munitions, and there was potential for US and coalition aircraft to be blamed for inevitable civilian casualties. What became evident was that the Russians were using the combat experience gained in Syria to test many of their systems, including the latest stealth platform (Su-57), but it also afforded them the opportunity to observe western (specifically US and UK) capability in close proximity. The overall conclusion drawn by the US was that Russian air capability had evolved substantially since the 1990s, but that it was evolutionary rather than a 'paradigmatic change' (p. 176). However, knowing that western intelligence would have been focused on Russian activity as well as that of ISIS, the Russians would not, necessarily, have betrayed their full hand.

Some readers may find Ben Lambeth's criticism of the first phase of Inherent Resolve overly harsh. He characterises it as a reactive 'day to day exercise in mindless target servicing in support of no overarching strategic course of action or clearly defined goal' (p. 179). Good strategy takes time to develop, and on the back of the success of the Libyan air campaign in 2011, which had as its overriding remit Responsibility to Protect (RTP), the Obama administration was doubtless prioritising the immediate threats to the civilian population. Unfortunately, this tended to characterise the initial part of Inherent Resolve as 'whack a mole'. However, the author is right to criticise the initial direction from the White House that targets in Syria were 'off limits'. ISIS was given a 'breathing space', allowing it to entrench and consolidate in Mosul and Raqqa.

The book is hard hitting in its conclusions. Ben Lambeth argues very convincingly that Operation Inherent Resolve would not have been necessary had the Obama administration allowed American forces and other government departments to stay in Iraq until the job was done, rather than setting an arbitrary deadline for withdrawal. Even when the threat posed by ISIS was overwhelming, he suggests, Obama was very slow to act. This was compounded by CENTCOM's failure to undertake contingency planning at an early stage, when common sense would have dictated that some action based on intelligence analysis of ISIS capability was required. The intelligence on ISIS was largely to hand, but the CENTCOM planning machinery was slow to act. It is difficult to ignore the 'what might have beens' raised by Ben Lambeth's book, especially if ISIS had been treated as a state in the making from the outset and the US and coalition forces had attacked strategic and tactical targets simultaneously. For many American military and civilian seniors, the initial stages of Operation Inherent Resolve brought back bad memories of historical graduated bombing campaigns – Rolling Thunder

in Vietnam (1965-68) and Allied Force in Kosovo (1999), both of which were judged to be, at best, only partial successes. In what is great shorthand for the strategist, Lambeth comments: 'even the most capable air posture imaginable can never be more effective than the strategy it seeks to underwrite' (p. 252). However, as he argues, we should not belittle the fact that a US-led coalition did respond in 2014, albeit somewhat slowly. Four and a half years later, Operation Inherent Resolve had liberated an estimated 7.7 million civilians and 98% of the territory formerly controlled by ISIS in Iraq and Syria (p. 247). Air power, in concert with Special Forces and indigenous ground forces, had proved what can be done with the requisite political resolve and appropriate instruments.

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