



President Barack Obama talks with Iraq's Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki during secure video teleconference in Situation Room, The White House, October 21, 2011 (White House/Pete Souza)

Flawed Jointness in the War Against the So-Called Islamic State

How a Different Planning Approach Might Have Worked Better

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Not long after the first round of anemic air strikes against the so-called Islamic State (IS) on August 8, 2014, it became clear to most that the initial effort ordered by President Barack Obama and undertaken by

U.S. Central Command (USCENTCOM) lacked an overarching strategy based on a well-founded understanding of the enemy and on a weighing of the full spectrum of available response options. Instead, USCENTCOM's

leaders fell back on their familiar past experiences and assessed IS as simply a resurrection of the recently defeated Iraqi insurgency rather than as the very different and ambitiously aggressive state-in-the-making that it actually was. As a result, they opted to engage the jihadist movement with an inappropriate counterinsurgency (COIN) approach that misprioritized rebuilding the Iraqi army as its predominant concern rather than pursuing a more promising strategy aimed at not only addressing Iraq's most immediate security needs but also attacking the enemy's most vulnerable center of gravity in Syria from the first day onward.

To be sure, throughout the 4-year-long effort belatedly codenamed Operation *Inherent Resolve* (OIR), the performance of the coalition aircrews who fought the war at the execution level was invariably able and impressive, reflecting the high standards of competence first showcased in Operation *Desert Storm* in 1991 and later sustained in all subsequent U.S.-led air operations worldwide. Yet by having wrongly adjudged IS as just a reborn insurgency and having misguidedly engaged it as such, USCENTCOM took as long to neutralize a fairly tractable low-technology enemy in the bounded spaces of Iraq and Syria in the second decade of the 21st century as it took the United States, in a total war for ultimate stakes, to defeat the far more powerful Imperial Japan and Nazi Germany in two theaters on opposite sides of the globe during World War II.

This review of the OIR experience considers how an alternative approach that made better use of USCENTCOM's fighting components in a more productive flow plan might have yielded the desired outcome 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 USCENTCOM's having first sized up the adversary for what it actually was—a self-avowed embryonic state—and

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 Combined Joint Task Force (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 toward overseeing a more truly joint and combined air-land campaign. Such a more fruitful approach would have leveraged USCENTCOM's air component as the *supported* force element at the campaign's start. Later, the coalition air component would have been swung to a more fully *supporting* role under a CJTF ground commander once U.S. and allied special operations forces (SOF) teams and joint terminal attack controllers (JTACs) began working with indigenous Iraqi and Syrian ground troops in a final land-centric push to defeat the enemy once and for all.

Some Consequential Missteps at the Campaign's Start

Any effort to learn usefully from the early failings of OIR must first recognize that the main reasons for the campaign's initial slowness to show much progress did not emanate from within USCENTCOM, but rather were occasioned entirely by a top-down decree from the Obama White House. As was later recalled by USCENTCOM's deputy commander at the time, Vice Admiral Mark Fox, it was "the Obama administration's . . . palpable reluctance to get more deeply involved that was the underlying cause of the campaign's slow and halting activities during the early days of the crisis." Admiral Fox further underscored that "it was Obama's decision to completely withdraw all U.S. forces from Iraq in 2012 that created the vacuum that [IS] filled in 2014," and it was the Obama national security team's "insistence on extremely restrictive rules of engagement [ROEs] 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 [USCENTCOM's] initial muddled response to the [IS] threat."¹

That said, even with all due allowance for the constraints imposed by Obama and his White House subordinates that so badly hampered USCENTCOM's freedom of action at the campaign's start, that organization's long-ingrained land-warfare predispositions also figured prominently when it came to generating the command's ultimately chosen response to the rise of IS. As one 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 USCENTCOM's headquarters] in the summer of 2014." That fact, he stated, worked mightily "to constrain any semblance of an interdiction campaign" emerging as a part of that command's initial combat response.² In a compelling testament to that predisposition when it came to their initial tasking to take on IS, USCENTCOM's leaders almost by 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 ROEs quite independent of the constraints insisted on by Obama's White House. That approach stressed the minimization of civilian casualties as the campaign's main imperative rather than going with all determination for the Islamist movement's throat.

Those initial planning missteps, however, were themselves natural outgrowths of an arguably even more suboptimal decision by USCENTCOM's commander, General Lloyd Austin III, USA; namely, his having assigned a three-star infantry general to oversee the first round of fighting against IS, 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. forces. To be sure, as Admiral Fox



U.S. Soldiers assigned to Battery C, 2nd Battalion, 319th Airborne Field Artillery Regiment, 82nd Airborne Division, fire M777 155mm howitzer during fire mission near Mosul, Iraq, February 3, 2017, in support of Combined Joint Task Force—Operation *Inherent Resolve* (U.S. Army/Craig Jensen)

later pointed out, USCENTCOM’s air component commander at the time had a full enough plate already, providing needed air support to the ongoing war in Afghanistan, whereas the 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.”³ Yet if there ever was a nascent challenge in USCENTCOM’s area of responsibility that begged for an air-centric solution, at least while IS was still gaining strength and when the now-moribund Iraqi security forces (ISF) 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, General Austin and his chosen subordinate commander for

OIR, Lieutenant General James Terry, USA, both proceeded to cast their impending effort instead as a *land* war, with USCENTCOM’s air component relegated solely to providing on-call support to a still only anticipated land counteroffensive yet to come. In a revealing post hoc confirmation of that largely unheeded reality on the ground in Iraq, when General Austin finally presented his envisioned construct for such a land campaign to Secretary of Defense Ashton Carter 6 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.”⁴

Assigning a CJTF Commander

Perhaps at least partly due to awareness of that fact, as was later acknowledged by OIR’s first deputy air component commander, Major General Jeffrey Lofgren, USAF, the prospective command arrangements for the coming campaign were “hotly debated with the [USCENTCOM] commander over several weeks.” Although General Lofgren did not indicate when that back and forth first began, who its main protagonists were, or 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 led at the start by an Army general or by an Airman. General Lofgren further acknowledged that “the Air Force was asked to provide manpower to the CJTF and did not do so initially, which [ultimately] shaped the early constructs [for the campaign].”⁵ In the end, he recalled, “the [USCENTCOM] commander’s going with the choice of ARCENT [U.S. Army Central Command] to plan and oversee it was driven more by comfort [on General Austin’s part] and the fact that the air component was not postured to be able to execute the CJTF mission.”⁶

Yet there was no reason in principle why USCENTCOM’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 General Austin was most “comfortable” with, but rather what class of expertise and associated skill set would be best suited for the commander ultimately chosen to plan and lead a successful campaign against the unique challenge that IS presented, at least at the start of OIR.⁷ That challenge all but begged for a well-targeted air attack plan as the looming campaign’s centerpiece.

To be sure, once OIR had evolved from its hesitant air-only start in August 2014 into its more well-developed pace as a land-centric campaign 3 years later, it was entirely natural that the most senior Airmen in its chain of command would have felt that a ground-force general offered the most apropos competency for overseeing such an endeavor. As the third successive Airman assigned as CJTF-OIR’s deputy commander for operations and intelligence, Major General Dirk Smith, USAF, recalled in this regard

when serving in that capacity from May 2017 to May 2018:

I wonder how the ISF and our partners in Syria would have done at developing the necessary trust and deep partnership with an Airman in lieu of a U.S. Army three-star as the CJTF-OIR commander? The [Army-specific concept that lay at the heart of the campaign’s strategy] requires very close commander-to-commander relationships and a keen understanding of ground schemes of maneuver.

Adding that the successive Army CJTF-OIR commanders under whom he had served “knew [personally] many of the ISF general officers from their previous multiple combat deployments to Iraq,” he stressed that any Airman serving in the same capacity “would need to be deliberately experienced and developed” to a similar high degree in order to be successful.⁸

In a similar vein, Major General Andrew Croft, USAF, who had served under Major General Smith as the deputy commanding general for air in CJTF-OIR’s land component and as its Joint Air Component Coordination Element director during the campaign’s final phase, likewise recalled:

By the time I got there, the advise-and-assist mission that was being done by the Army brigade up in Mosul was absolutely critical to the fight. It therefore made sense to have the battalion-brigade-division-corps chain of command and processes in place that the Army brought to the battlefield. . . . We tied in the airpower from our positions, but had an Airman commanded the CJTF, we still would have needed the same ground-centric capabilities.⁹

Fortunately for the ultimate success of OIR, its Army-led headquarters by mid-2016 and thereafter—at long last having included an uninterrupted succession of experienced two-star 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 USCENTCOM’s air component figured

both centrally and effectively as the sole kinetic contribution to an overall ground-centric war plan. As the third of these senior Airmen, Major General Smith, later pointed out:

Given the great work done by [his Air Force predecessors, Major Generals] 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 land component commanders’ perspective to the [air component commander and his deputy].¹⁰

That eventually well-tuned integration of U.S. and coalition airpower as the lead player in OIR’s effort against IS, however, was anything but the norm during the campaign’s first year. As later explained by Major General Charles Moore, Jr., USAF, 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 USCENTCOM, including with all of its subordinate components and with the Iraqi government. Eventually, he recalled, by around the start of 2015, the Air Force sent Brigadier General 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 IS.

For at least the campaign’s first 5 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 IS were from the air, with OIR’s Army personnel focused solely on rebuilding what had been lost from the fragile ISF following President Obama’s withdrawal of all U.S. forces from Iraq in 2012. That meant that USCENTCOM’s only component actually engaged in combat operations against IS was not in command of those operations. In that plainly

dysfunctional situation from an ideal joint-Service perspective, CJTF-OIR's first commander, Lieutenant General Terry, would brief the daily air operations flow via videoteleconference from Kuwait to USCENTCOM's commander, General Austin, sitting in his headquarters back in Tampa, Florida. As Major General Moore later recalled, in that odd briefing arrangement, USCENTCOM's air component commander, Lieutenant General John Hesterman III, participating from his Combined Air Operations Center (CAOC) in Qatar, "was often left with little to say when it was his turn, which usually occurred last."¹¹ It was not until May 2015, nearly a year into the campaign, when Major General Gersten arrived in position as CJTF-OIR's assigned deputy commander for air. This provided direct senior air representation on Lieutenant General 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 USCENTCOM's war against IS was so ineffectual throughout its first year when it came to weakening IS in its most vital strategic center.

Regarding the air component's eventual effort to heighten the airpower focus within CJTF-OIR, the campaign's second successive air component commander, Lieutenant General Charles Brown, Jr., USAF, almost as a 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 almost exclusively Iraq-focused, to CJTF-OIR's headquarters in Kuwait so as to achieve a broader airpower focus across that command's entire area of operations, most notably including in Syria as well as Iraq. As to his rationale for that important move, General 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."¹²

That perspective and intention, one can fairly state in hindsight, should have been a key part of CJTF-OIR's campaign approach from the very start.

The Lost Opportunity of a More Promising Approach

As a notional alternative to the command structure for OIR that ultimately emerged, what if General Austin had instead picked his air component commander to take the lead, at least at the start of campaign planning, from the first moment USCENTCOM was tasked by the White House to engage IS? Given the realities of the strategic landscape that prevailed in Iraq and Syria in late July and early August 2014, a more promising initial move by USCENTCOM's commander would have been to accept that there would be no sufficiently combat-ready indigenous ground troops in the region for his air assets to "support" in a truly influential way for at least a year, and that until such a reality was finally at hand, he should instead pursue a more logical approach for the interim by designating his air commander as his first subordinate CJTF-OIR commander and duly empowering that Airman to apply his and his staff's collective skills toward determining how best to carry the fight to IS, at least until a true joint and combined air-land campaign was ready to be unleashed with determination.

In a strong seconding motion to such an alternative approach, General Brown later suggested that at least during the campaign's initial stages, as CJTF-OIR's land component was mainly focused on rebuilding the ISF, USCENTCOM'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 serious offensive land operations were set to begin. This alternative approach would have had the right leadership and expertise in charge more properly aligned with the initial scheme of the campaign."¹³ A similar sentiment was offered by an Air Force F-16 pilot who flew in two successive OIR rotations during its largely ineffectual opening

round. This Airman remarked that what Army and Air Force leadership within USCENTCOM had *both* failed to recognize in sufficient time was

*that [IS] 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 . . . while concurrently doing our utmost to hurt [IS's] warfighting capability with a sustained air campaign. Yet we did the former but not the latter during OIR's pivotal first two years. . . . 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.*¹⁴

On this important count, even retired Colonel Peter Mansoor, USA, who had served as a key advisor to General David Petraeus in Iraq during the latter's eventually successful surge of 2007, suggested that "if this [effort against IS] was going to be just an air campaign [which it most definitely was for U.S. forces during its first 2 years], it would have made much more sense to have an Air Force officer in Baghdad and have him lead the charge."¹⁵ With such more appropriate leadership in place, an Air Force commander for CJTF-OIR at the outset would have had every inclination and opportunity to mobilize the vast intelligence resources at his disposal to take the fullest measure of IS and to undertake the needed initial target system development *before* committing to any ensuing plan for the war's opening round.

Of course, in order to ensure the eventual reconstitution of the ISF to the degree necessary for it to engage IS effectively in sustained land combat, there would still have been a need for CJTF-OIR to interact closely from the effort's first day onward with the ISF's leadership. And that need would have demanded a depth of land-warfare expertise and familiarity with the Iraqi situation



Marines attached to 26th Marine Expeditionary Unit load GBU-54 bomb onto AV-8B Harrier on flight deck of USS *Kearsarge*, supporting Operation *Inherent Resolve*, Arabian Gulf, December 28, 2015 (U.S. Navy/Tyler Preston)

on the ground that *no* Airman could have been expected to offer. However, as David Deptula rightly noted, that role could easily enough have been fulfilled by a suitably experienced two-star Army deputy CJTF commander for land operations with intimate previous connections with his ISF counterparts. “But without an Airman in charge,” Deptula added, “there would have been *no* possibility of a strategy being developed from the very start that put the [IS] center of gravity in Syria in the crosshairs as a campaign first priority rather than second priority.”¹⁶

True enough, anyone viewing CJTF-OIR’s challenge as it eventually unfolded could rightly conclude that the organizational wherewithal and skills offered by USCENTCOM’s air commander would have been ill-suited to render him a compelling choice for effectively overseeing such an air-land campaign endgame. In that regard, the Air Force fighter pilot

who served for a year previously as CJTF-OIR’s deputy commander for operations and intelligence after the campaign had already been well under way, Major General Kindsvater, reasonably doubted whether an Airman could have effectively led what he called the “multidivision and then corps/two-nation fight” that was being conducted by CJTF-OIR when the needed skills for exercising proper command oversight in such a capacity have never, as he rightly put it, been traditionally part of the Air Force’s “functional expertise.”¹⁷

Yet the “multidivision and then corps/two-nation fight” that CJTF-OIR ultimately ended up conducting against IS was not the only alternative available to USCENTCOM for taking on the jihadist movement from the campaign’s first day onward. To the contrary, there is every reason to believe that an Airman as CJTF-OIR’s initial

overall commander might well have chosen a different template for engaging the jihadist threat by pursuing a more air-centric course of action that would not require, at least at the outset, the spectrum of land warfare skills that later would be essential for commanding a preponderant ground force of the sort that ultimately became the centerpiece of OIR. In this regard, Major General Charles Corcoran, USAF, who served as the chief of staff to USCENTCOM’s air component in 2013 and 2014, offered one retrospective insight into how an Airman as the overall CJTF commander might have approached the initial planning for the impending campaign in a way substantially different from the route ultimately chosen. Having had a catbird seat in the CAOC from which to observe developments from up close as the jihadist movement first arose, he later recalled that a major reason for OIR’s faltering

missteps at the campaign's start was "simply our lack of understanding of the enemy." He then added, "Target system analysis takes time," and USCENTCOM had not done its needed homework before embarking on its Iraq-dominant, COIN-oriented, and land-centric initial response to IS, when what was actually needed was a plan fundamentally different in both nature and level of intensity. "We need to learn this lesson," he insisted, and continued:

We can't wait for a conflict [as we did while IS was first gaining strength throughout Iraq and Syria] to understand our potential enemies and their critical infrastructure. We need to do this analysis now . . . in peacetime. . . . Once we have that in hand, we can [then] develop a campaign to dismantle and defeat [the enemy] using all forms of power at our disposal, including airpower.¹⁸

Unfortunately, militating against much of a chance of USCENTCOM's having arrived at any such more appropriately focused approach toward engaging IS from the very start, "CJTF-OIR from day one onward was more accurately a U.S. Army Corps headquarters," as the British Royal Air Force's air contingent commander for the campaign 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, with no formal air representation in the subordinate command structure that USCENTCOM had cobbled together for OIR for at least the campaign's first 5 months, "air was rarely embedded early in CJTF planning and had to fight valiantly to be heard."¹⁹

An Initial Dearth of Needed Target Intelligence

Of course, to have been most productive from the start, any alternative approach toward countering IS with a principal focus on interdicting its most vital assets on the move would have required USCENTCOM and its air component, along with their organic

intelligence and planning organizations, to have stepped out with the greatest dispatch toward generating the needed wherewithal to conduct the requisite target system analysis and weaponeering for underwriting such a campaign. On this count, any number of OIR principals have hastened to stress how USCENTCOM lacked the needed inputs at the campaign's start to conduct such an undertaking. For example, in pushing back against any intimation that "we had a ton of options to move more rapidly in Syria," the Special Presidential Envoy for the Global Coalition to Counter the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant, Brett McGurk, pointed out that "we had nothing to work with in Syria and very little fidelity as to what was happening on the ground" in that country during OIR's first halting months.²⁰ Similarly, Vice Admiral Fox noted "the absolute lack of targeting intelligence" needed during OIR's initial phase to underwrite an effective interdiction campaign.²¹

Yet there was ample testimony from line operators actually engaged in the fight that the needed information was there all along—had it only been marshaled, assessed, and disseminated in a timely way. As the above-quoted F-16 pilot later recalled:

During each sortie during the campaign's first month, we would watch all sorts of [IS]-related activity going on in Syria. . . . The targets were definitely out there for us to kill. I saw them day after day. . . . No one listened to us. True, we were unsure going into Syria at the time, because it was new and different. . . . But had we acknowledged [IS] for the proto-state entity that it was, we could've moved swiftly on these targets of opportunity despite all the other issues with ground fidelity.

Clinching his argument, he added,

The overall strategy did not need to be a new one. It simply should have been: Find their center of gravity and hit it quickly and accurately. Part of OIR was admittedly trying to get the Iraqis back on their feet. But at the same time, we should have

pulverized [IS] leadership and cash flow at the beginning. We eventually got there, but we lost some serious opportunities up front with blatantly identifiable targets . . . in which we could have done some serious damage and saved lots of lives. We flew over such targets in Syria day in and day out with bombs on our jets, reported them to everyone we could, and still we did nothing about it.²²

General Brown himself later remarked, "One area I was pushing for was target system analysis to get to the 'so what' and target more effectively. I didn't want to wait for a product that was six months or so in the making but instead wanted a 50 percent solution so we could start striking in a more deliberate manner."²³ Had such a more energetic response been undertaken by USCENTCOM in a sufficiently timely way at the campaign's start, General Brown's more promising approach, applying more permissive ROEs, could have caused far more serious harm to the movement's most valued assets, and at an earlier stage of the campaign had IS been correctly assessed and engaged from the outset as a proto-state rather than an insurgency.

Opportunity Costs

Viewed in hindsight, the disappointing early returns yielded by the halting air war that unfolded against IS for more than a year was mainly a result of the Obama administration's obsessive top-down micromanagement of the campaign and its insistence at the bombing's start on oppressive restrictions on attackable targets in the vain and totally unrealistic hope of achieving zero civilian fatalities. However, it also was a predictable result of USCENTCOM's suboptimal command arrangement and resort to an inappropriate COIN strategy from the campaign's first moments onward. After what Secretary Carter later well characterized as USCENTCOM's "ad hoc launch" of its initially flawed war plan in early August 2014, the vast oil reserves in Iraq and Syria that were being controlled and exploited by IS



KC-135 Stratotanker pilot with 340th Expeditionary Air Refueling Squadron preflights aircraft before taking off from base in U.S. Central Command area of responsibility in support of mission conducting airstrikes in Syria, September 23, 2014 (U.S. Air Force/Matthew Bruch)

for copious financial gain were not targeted and struck until a full 15 months later, offering yet another testament to the downside costs of the misguided gradualism and inappropriate focus of USCENTCOM's initial approach to its counter-IS effort.²⁴ That faulty mindset and the campaign plan that naturally flowed from it gave the jihadist movement some \$800 million a year in black market revenue that allowed it to continue recruiting Islamist zealots from around the world and to continue terrorizing the Iraqi and Syrian noncombatants who were caught in its grip.

In marked contrast, a more productive strategy would have concentrated instead on interdicting IS's flow of oil and other vital supplies from the campaign's first moments onward rather than wasting valuable sorties in a misprioritized air "support" endeavor flown over Iraq's cities mainly to serve the advise-and-assist

interests of Army generals in Baghdad who, in fact, commanded *no* forces actually engaged in the fight. Had such an alternative approach been pursued instead by CJTF-OIR from the campaign's start, the vast majority of USCENTCOM's early air surveillance operations would have been flown not over Iraq's urban areas but, as Major General Moore later put it, "across the border in Syria and in the Anbar desert[,] building situation awareness for our interdiction attacks. Imagine the Ho Chi Minh trail, but in a desert!"²⁵

By and by, more determined new leadership in the White House by the start of 2017, driven by a deeper commitment to ending the war decisively, issued new directives to USCENTCOM for the latter to lift its most burdensome impediments to more rapid progress toward that reformulated goal. That pivotal top-down change soon made the crucial difference

that finally allowed well-prepared indigenous friendly Iraqi and Syrian ground troops, supported by unerringly effective coalition airpower, to sweep IS off the battlefield in both Iraq and Syria.

Some Implications Worth Pondering

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 IS 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 restraints imposed by flawed initial leadership directives that misunderstood the enemy as a reborn Iraqi insurgency and that wrongly insisted on ROEs meant for a different kind of war.

Nevertheless, when viewed from an overall strategic perspective, the Obama administration's and USCENTCOM's needlessly prolonged Operation *Inherent Resolve* was oxymoronic in both concept and execution throughout its first year or more. Although USCENTCOM had no hand whatever in occasioning the inhibiting gradualism that was forced on it at the campaign's start by the administration's unrealistic insistence on zero civilian casualties, that command should have immediately begun its response planning after having been tasked to engage IS by first understanding the movement for what it actually was and then by regarding it—and by engaging it with real rather than merely avowed “inherent resolve”—as a self-declared state in the making, featuring targetable state-like characteristics. A related misstep in USCENTCOM's initial goal-setting was arguably its decision to secure Iraq first by tasking its air component to devote most of its assets exclusively toward providing dedicated air “support” to a still-not-combat-ready ISF instead of reaching out concurrently to strike IS's core equities in Syria that bore more directly on the movement's capacity for sustained fighting.

Finally, even if it was not to be for General Austin to have chosen his air commander to head up CJTF-OIR at the campaign's start, it was essential that USCENTCOM's air component, once it became clear that the rise of IS would eventually demand a determined U.S. response, move with the greatest dispatch toward crafting an option that would most fully exploit the strategic leverage offered by U.S. and coalition airpower. Yet as Lieutenant General Deptula remarked tellingly after the campaign was over, the apparent absence of any such consideration in USCENTCOM's initial planning “occurred in part because its air component, by all outward signs, did not

effectively argue for such a more promising course of action.”²⁶ At a minimum, as Major General Croft later reflected in this regard, “we [in the air component] clearly should have put an Airman . . . into the CJTF upper-echelon staff earlier.”²⁷ Commenting for his part on this lost opportunity for USCENTCOM's air component while IS was still gestating in Iraq and Syria, retired General Charles Horner, USAF, the overseer of USCENTCOM's casebook air offensive that largely occasioned the successful outcome of Operation *Desert Storm*, stressed the 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.”²⁸ Fortunately, such a response eventually gained effective traction within USCENTCOM's air component and helped to produce OIR's winning result in the end. JFQ

Notes

¹ Vice Admiral Mark Fox, USN (Ret.), email message to author, August 9, 2020.

² Comments provided by Colonel Steven Gregg, USAF, October 23, 2018.

³ Fox, email message to author.

⁴ Ash Carter, *A Lasting Defeat: The Campaign to Destroy ISIS* (Cambridge, MA: Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs, October 2017), 14.

⁵ Comments provided by Lieutenant General Jeffrey Lofgren, USAF, March 5, 2019.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Major General Dirk Smith, USAF, email message to author, April 1, 2019.

⁹ Major General Andrew Croft, USAF, email messages to author, January 3 and January 10, 2019.

¹⁰ Smith, email message to author.

¹¹ Major General Charles Moore, Jr., USAF, email message to author, April 24, 2019.

¹² General Charles Brown, Jr., USAF, email message to author, July 5, 2019.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Major Greg Balzhiser, USAF, email message to author, August 8, 2019.

¹⁵ Quoted in Matthew Jamison, “From Air War to Ground War: The Obama Administration's Evolving Campaign Against ISIS and the

Assad Regime,” *Strategic Culture*, June 24, 2016, available at <www.strategic-culture.org/news/2016/06/24/from-air-war-ground-war-obama-administration-evolving-campaign-against-isis-assad-regime/>.

¹⁶ Lieutenant General David Deptula, USAF (Ret.), email message to author, April 1, 2019.

¹⁷ Major General Scott Kindsvater, USAF, email message to author, August 5, 2018.

¹⁸ Major General Charles Corcoran, USAF, email message to author, April 22, 2018.

¹⁹ Air Vice-Marshal Johnny Stringer, Royal Air Force, email message to author, April 16, 2018.

²⁰ Brett McGurk, email message to author, April 18, 2019.

²¹ Fox, email message to author.

²² Balzhiser, email message to author.

²³ Brown, email message to author.

²⁴ Carter, *A Lasting Defeat*, 18.

²⁵ Major General Charles Moore, Jr., USAF, email message to author, April 23, 2018.

²⁶ David A. Deptula, foreword to *Airpower in the War Against ISIS*, by Benjamin S. Lambeth (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, January 2021).

²⁷ Major General Andrew Croft, USAF, email message to author, August 12, 2020.

²⁸ General Charles Horner, USAF (Ret.), email message to author, August 31, 2020.