



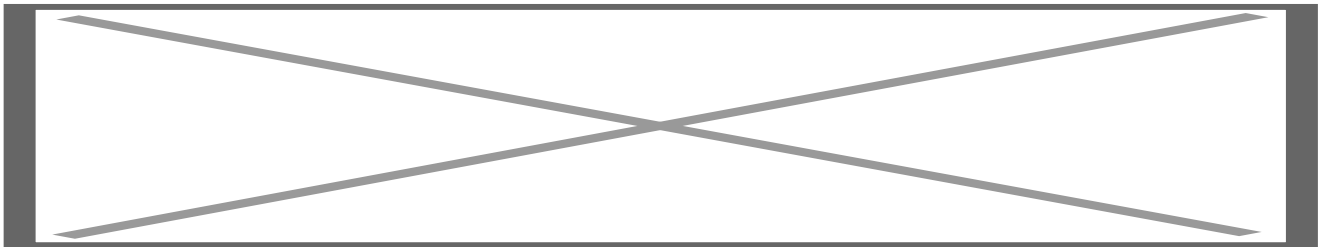
Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments

ANALYSIS

The Unserious Air War Against ISIS

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(<http://www.csbaonline.org/2014/10/15/the-unserious-air-war-against-isis/banner-2014-10-15-gunzinger-and-stillion-wsj/>)

The campaign against Serbia in 1999 averaged 138 strike sorties daily. Against Islamic State in Iraq and Syria: seven.

Since U.S. planes first struck targets in Iraq on Aug. 8, a debate has raged over the effectiveness of the Obama administration's air campaign against Islamic State. The war of words has so far focused on the need to deploy American boots on the ground to provide accurate intelligence and possibly force ISIS fighters to defend key infrastructure they have seized, such as oil facilities. But debate is now beginning to focus on the apparent failure of airstrikes to halt the terror group's advances in Iraq and Syria—especially Islamic State's pending seizure of Kobani on the Syrian border with Turkey.

While it is still too early to proclaim the air campaign against Islamic State a failure, it may be instructive to compare it with other campaigns conducted by the U.S. military since the end of the Cold War that were deemed successes. For instance, during the 43-day Desert Storm air campaign against Saddam Hussein's forces in 1991, coalition fighters and bombers flew 48,224 strike sorties.

This translates to roughly 1,100 sorties a day. Twelve years later, the 31-day air campaign that helped free Iraq from Saddam's government averaged more than 800 offensive sorties a day. By contrast, over the past two months U.S. aircraft and a small number of partner forces have conducted 412 total strikes in Iraq and Syria—an average of seven strikes a day. With Islamic State in control of an area approaching 50,000 square miles, it is easy to see why this level of effort has not had much impact on its operations.

Of course, air operations during Desert Storm and Iraqi Freedom were each supported by a massive coalition force on the ground. Thus it may be more appropriate to compare current operations against Islamic State with the 78-day air campaign against Serbian forces and their proxies in 1999, or the 75-day air campaign in Afghanistan that was instrumental in forcing the Taliban out of power in 2001.

Both campaigns relied heavily on partner forces on the ground augmented by a small but significant number of U.S. troops. These air campaigns averaged 138 and 86 strike sorties a day respectively—orders of magnitude greater than the current tempo of operations against Islamic State.

Perhaps the small number of strikes in the air campaign against Islamic State is due to the lack of suitable ground targets. Yet representatives from the Pentagon have characterized forces fighting under Islamic State's black banner as more of a conventional army than a highly dispersed, irregular force similar to today's Taliban. Moreover, Islamic State fighters are using captured armored vehicles, artillery, mortars and other implements of modern land warfare to seize and hold terrain. These operations require a considerable amount of movement and resupply that can be detected by airborne surveillance.

The low daily strike count could be the result of the Pentagon's applying counterterrorism manhunting operations over the past decade to the current crisis in Iraq and Syria. These operations generally rely on detailed knowledge of the "pattern of life" of specific small terrorist cells built up over days or weeks of persistent surveillance.

The resources required on the ground and in the air to generate such high-fidelity intelligence are considerable in terms of time, money, personnel and surveillance aircraft. While the low strike count appears to support this thesis, it is unlikely that the highly competent men and women in our nation's military, many of whom are likely to have planned and executed previous successful air campaigns, would adopt such a half-measure approach to operations against ISIS forces.

There's another possibility: The moral imperative and strategic desire to avoid civilian casualties and gratuitous collateral damage may be constraining the coalition's target-selection process.

While these are important factors in any conflict, they must be balanced against the reality that allowing Islamic State fighters to continue their savage aggression nearly unchecked will result in far more civilian casualties and destruction than a more aggressive air campaign that uses precision weapons to rapidly destroy the group's heavy weapons and troop concentrations.

Finally, the daily strike count suggests that the strategy underlying the air campaign may be influenced by a desire to apply the least amount of force possible while still claiming credit for doing something about Islamic State. This rationale would fit with the administration's claims that degrading and eventually defeating ISIS is likely to take many years. It may reflect lingering doubts by some policy makers over how serious and far-reaching the threat of an Islamic State caliphate really is to our nation's vital interests. Or it may be a simple reluctance to begin another open-ended military operation in the Middle East.

In the end, no matter the reason, the timorous use of air power against Islamic State fighters in Iraq and Syria is unlikely to reduce the territory under their control, curb the brutal murder of innocent civilians, or prevent the creation of a sanctuary for an enemy that has sworn to continue its fight on a more global scale.