

The Law of Futility: Air Strikes Against the Islamic State

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Theme: [US NATO War Agenda](#)

In-depth Report: [SYRIA](#)

War is a dirty, unforgiving business. It is not rendered clean by remote deployments and orders executed at a distance from seemingly safe areas. It takes lives, inflicts unspeakable harm, and rarely brings smiles to those who suffer it. But the members of the US-led coalition currently involved in striking Islamic State targets in Syria and Iraq would have you think otherwise. They give the impression that clean distances are golden, and air strikes will have their intended “degrading” effect. Therein lies the message about the false salvation of machinery – the technological panacea that rarely does what it is meant to.

The notion that air power would win the day has been something of a fetish for enthusiasts, both of the prophetic and practising sort. It prophetically concerned H. G. Wells in *The War in the Air* (1908). It enraptured Britain’s blood lusting Air Marshal Arthur “Bomber” Harris during World War II, who believed in characteristically delusional fashion that his death sowing fleets won the war in exclusive fashion. Curtis “Demon” Le May fronted as the US equivalent, instrumental behind the striking of sixty-four Japanese cities between March and August 1945 that killed around 330,000 people. The doctrinal holy water, however, came from the font of the US Strategic Bombing Survey.

At most times, however, such bombing took place alongside massive deployments of troops on the ground, a complementary union of industrially inflicted destruction. As sophisticated as weapons might ever be, the lack of ground impetus is a fundamental weakness to any assertions of effect.

The technical imperative has culminated in the myth of “surgical” bombing, suggesting that the state being targeted is to be treated equally as an enemy to be defeated and a patient to be cured. Spare the civilians, despoil the regime. Such notions became popular with the emergence of that troubling notion of “humanitarian” intervention, treating the human subject as sacred even as bombs rain all around.

Such tactics generally show that most targets will survive sorties waged by “surgical” strike. In some cases, there is desperation to find targets that are even worth striking, a matter hampered by considerations regarding high civilian casualties and the like. The list invariably runs out, with pilots all dressed up with weapons with nowhere to go.

NATO’s campaign in Kosovo revealed the vast problems and ineffectiveness associated with a campaign waged by the distant and the righteous. While there was a dangerous fatuousness in bombing targets in Serbia (refineries, facilities, control towers, television stations) over conduct taking place in Kosovo proper, any strategic assessment of the results was always going to be grim. (Being humanitarian to Kosovo refugees by bombing bridges used by civilians in Novi Sad and Belgrade was peculiar, cock-eyed moral

arithmetic.)

In terms of crude efficiency, the NATO deployments were grossly ineffective, with analysts glowering at the average daily figure of 0.75 sorties a day. In the words of the UK Commons defence committee, “The limitations of air power in pursuit of ... humanitarian goals were clearly demonstrated and this lesson must be learned.”[1] The foiling strategy from the Serb forces proved impressive – over 79 days, NATO seemed to be flying blind, hitting a mere 13 of the 300 battle tanks in the inventory. Dummy targets proved easy bait for expensive weaponry.

This still doesn't stop the reminiscences of such individuals as Lieutenant General Michael C. Short, commander of NATO forces involved in the campaign, from babbling about severing “the head of the snake on the first night”. In the words of Martin van Creveld, “We know that, when the shooting stopped and the smoke cleared, the Serb Army emerged practically intact from the woods which it was hidden. To that extent, the campaign was a failure.” [2]

Then came Libya, another exercise of holy humanitarianism, this time dressed in the garishly ugly garb of the responsibility to protect. The effort to save civilian lives, having been pimped by such individuals as the loud and erratic philosopher Bernard-Henri Lévy, took aim at a host of targets that served merely to embolden the militias with easily available weapons, destroying any semblance of stability.

The next pit stop on the race of absurdity in waging limited humanitarian war has taken place with the bombing campaign in Syria and Iraq against Islamic State targets and the Khorasan Group. By the admission of the US Pentagon, “gaps” have emerged in intelligence. This stands to reason – the Pentagon is using a technological imperative to drive a technological mission, spiced by the subject of altruistic valour. In the war of the video gamers, there are few human “spotters” on the ground, and these are being left to special forces. In the main, however, surveillance flights, satellites and drones are being used to identify the targets. Vague assessments are being made in the aftermath of such strikes as to whether any civilians were lost in the encounter.

Pentagon officials are suggesting that the intelligence (always a problematic term in itself) is less thorough in Syria and Iraq than it has been in Pakistan and Yemen during the drone campaigns. It has already been noted that empty buildings long vacated by Islamic State fighters have been struck.[3] It is even being admitted now by US officials that earlier Tomahawk cruise missile strikes on the Khorasan Group in Syria did little to kill key members or disrupt supplies.[4]

Rather dispiritingly, retired colonel and former advisor to the Joint Chiefs of Staff Tom Lynch has said that, “it's much harder for us to be able to know for sure what it is we're hitting, and what it is we're killing and what[sic] it is collateral damage.” Something to truly inspire confidence.

From “gaps” in intelligence come gaping holes in credibility. It has become necessary on the part of the raiders of misguided principle to rhetorically bolster the enemy being confronted. Like the Serbs during the NATO bombings of 1999, the Islamic State forces are been seen as cunning, devious adversaries who won't play by the rules of easy targeting. (How unsporting of them!) The US-led forces do not want to look like blind aggressors leading more blind aggressors, but this is an impression they are finding hard to dispel. “They're a smart adversary,” insists Air Force Maj. Gen. Jeffrey L. Harrigan.[5] A smart

adversary facing rather thick ones.

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Notes

- [1] <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/sep/30/bombing-isis-futile-air-strikes-iraq>
- [2] <http://smallwarsjournal.com/blog/journal/docs-temp/799-manea2.pdf>
- [3] http://www.timesrecord.com/news/2014-10-01/Nation/Airstrikes_launched_amid_intelligence_gaps.html
- [4] <http://www.smh.com.au/world/strikes-on-khorasan-in-syria-did-not-inflict-decisive-blow--us-sources-say-20141004-10q87i.html>
- [5] <http://www.foxnews.com/politics/2014/10/01/us-airstrikes-against-isis-reportedly-suffer-from-intelligence-gaps/>

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