The Use of Airpower in Combating Terrorism in Iraq*

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NATIONS HAVE USED their air forces to fight conventional wars and combat insurgents. Most air force planning, training, and preparation have depended upon a conventional view of warfare, and air forces have proven effective in such conflict. A nation with a strong, effective air force would likely win battles if it properly employed that force during planning, target selection, and execution of combat roles such as strategic bombing, air superiority, and close air support (CAS), as well as in support operations such as airlift, surveillance, and reconnaissance. Air forces have used various types of aircraft, satellites, and other platforms to perform these conventional roles, and powerful nations have become extremely skillful at using conventional airpower. For example, the United States military has distinguished itself by producing decisive effects by means of air and space power at the desired time and place in the conventional wars it has fought.

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Counterinsurgency (COIN) warfare, however, is another matter altogether. According to Dr. Thomas Searle, “We are very good at conventional warfare. Too bad that isn’t enough any more. In Iraq and Afghanistan, the US military quickly defeated enemy conventional military forces and brought down hostile regimes. Afterward, however, counterguerrilla operations did not fare so well.” So the US Air Force (USAF) found itself unprepared for this new phenomenon, known variously as terrorism, guerrilla warfare, or COIN—depending upon the various labels/euphemisms given it by politicians, military people, or others. This type of warfare differs from that which the United States and other countries have encountered in such places as Vietnam.

Those of us in the old Iraqi Army experienced COIN warfare in northern Iraq, where a dictatorial regime attempted to put down Kurdish rebels fighting for their legitimate rights. The Kurds fought honorably and targeted those who opposed them—that is, the Iraqi Army. They did not hurt innocent people or use the cowardly tactics of today’s terrorists. In that struggle, the Iraqi Air Force (IqAF) undertook reconnaissance and CAS missions, but Saddam Hussein sent weapons of mass destruction against the Kurdish town of Halabja and other places in Iraq. Therefore, we should not be surprised by the practices of his remaining thugs who now use the vilest and most cowardly means available to kill the innocent.

**Terrorism**

In the last few years of the twentieth century, new enemies appeared—those who threaten civilization and seek to spread terror and commit genocide. Lacking a particular objective or clear ideology, they exploit people whose primary concern is making money. This much is clear to us, based on what these enemies have done in Iraq. They have an Islamic identity and use Islam to justify their actions, yet they besmirch this faith—the religion of love and peaceful coexistence, which abides by the tenet “There is no coercion in religion.”

These enemies differ from those involved in the insurgency and rebellion movements that emerged after World War II—“limited wars” in which air forces participated very effectively. Communist rebels employed guerrilla warfare and insurgencies—old forms of conflict—whether their ideology was Communism, Marxism-Leninism, or Maoism. Superpowers openly backed and sponsored these generally well-organized and well-run rebellions, but the new enemy in Iraq and Afghanistan consists of a group of criminals, thieves, rebels, and terrorists similar to those in Colombia and the Philippines. Although several definitions and names have emerged for terrorism, the variety found in Iraq has proven distinctive. I regard as terrorists those who adopt abominable and backward sectarian ideologies, terrify and kill innocent civilians, destroy civilization, and create instability, havoc, chaos, and lawlessness in order to gain money and privileges.

This terrorism in Iraq has enjoyed secret support from a number of nations and well-known people, including non-Arab regional powers as well as Arab states and personalities, in an attempt to export terrorists to places outside their own borders. Tellingly, we hear that a person who kills innocents and stirs up instability in neighboring Arab or non-Arab countries is a terrorist but that one who does the same thing in Iraq is a mujahid. Other neighboring countries have additional motives, such as their fear of emerging democratic trends in the Middle East. The United States and its allies promoted democracy in that region after suffering terrorist attacks of the sort espoused by the rogue regimes of Saddam Hussein and the Taliban. As for those who lost their absolute authority and illicit privileges after the fall of these regimes, they aim to tear apart the fabric of the state by any means possible, including the manipulation of simple criminals who only want to earn money, regardless of its source, and who take refuge among ordinary citizens and then target them. Elusive as fish in the water, these terrorists constantly change their tactics, making them difficult to catch, but they lack discipline and are less proficient with advanced weapons.
than many Cold War-era rebels. For the most part, terrorists in Iraq fall into four categories:

1. Members of al-Qaeda—people who have adopted vile, heretical ideas and have veiled themselves as Islamists.

2. Baathists—Saddamists who lost their former privileges and power.

3. Members of the Islamic militias who call themselves “Shiite Islamists” and receive support from Iran and some Arab nations interested in keeping America involved in a guerrilla war inside Iraq. They may also fear the growing trend of democracy in that country, considering that form of government a threat to their existence, future, and position.

4. Terrorists pushed into Iraq by other states under the pretext of participating in a jihad but actually exported to remove the threat they represent to those nations.

Events Following 11 September 2001

The terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001 in the United States alerted the world to a new type of terrorist aggression that will stop at nothing and can strike anywhere. Shocked by this horrifying criminal deed, the world realized that no government could continue to defend the rogue regimes that had supported terrorism, particularly those of Saddam and the Taliban. On the basis of these developments, the United States proceeded to mobilize the world’s media and undertake a military response to bring down these foes, after which Libya and North Korea softened their stances. The US military encountered no difficulty in bringing down Saddam, aided by the discontent of the Iraqi people, who had no will to fight and no desire to sacrifice themselves for a lost cause and a government that neither represented nor appealed to them. Because even the Baathists lacked conviction, we saw no well-known commanders fighting bravely and dying in battle; indeed, not a single prominent military commander fell in battle alongside his unit. Everybody thought of running away because no one believed in Saddam, who in fact was one of the first to flee, fearful of dying at the gates of Baghdad or at one of his palaces. For this reason, Iraq presented an easy target for the US military. During this battle, the USAF undertook many aerial missions, including strategic bombing, air strikes, air superiority, CAS, and other operations in coordination with ground forces. Transport planes effectively provided air bridges for moving units and carrying out other logistical missions. Other aircraft engaged in all types of reconnaissance.

The USAF achieved excellent results, bringing down Saddam and the Taliban, but a new phase emerged that featured insurgency operations, terrorism, and instability aimed at preventing the restoration of government authority. The paucity of intelligence, inaccuracy of target selection, and general ambiguity of this operational environment have created problems for air and space forces in Iraq. Who are the terrorists? What are their objectives? Their practice of blending in with civilians complicates efforts to locate and deal with them, particularly for the USAF—not that it has performed poorly; it simply lacks a clear vision of the battles being fought. This problem has led to many mistakes and has contributed to a negative psychological reaction on the part of the news media. In short, the situation in Iraq requires particular weapons; accurate, reliable intelligence; and ground/air coordination on all levels, particularly the lower ones, in addition to communications and liaison capabilities.

A lack of clear objectives, inadequate doctrine, and insufficient proficiency in carrying out necessary counterterrorism missions limits airpower’s role in Iraq. Military forces have a problem figuring out how air and space power can contribute to operations that do not involve a major battle. Airpower found itself confined to air transport, maintenance of air bridges, reconnaissance, and other supporting roles. Helicopters, used extensively in Iraq, suffered heavy losses because they fly at low altitudes, presenting an easy target for ter-
rorists deployed in hidden areas hard to discern from the air. However, aircraft did execute a number of effective missions, and remote-controlled planes undertook reconnaissance and bombardment of selected targets, especially in battles involving Najaf as well as Fallujah and other Anbar areas. Nevertheless, served poorly by an inadequate intelligence apparatus and inaccurate target selection, the USAF mistakenly bombed many civilian areas. Later on, airpower’s role began to expand in terms of involvement in and adaptation to battles, and intelligence began to improve. The air strike against the criminal al-Qaeda leader Abu Musab al-Zarqawi represented a crowning achievement of this development and coordination; furthermore, it reflected noticeable changes in the use of helicopters and remote-controlled aircraft at night.

**Terrorists and Their Methods**

By 2007 the terrorists’ objectives had become abundantly clear. On the whole, they wanted to create instability by attacking oil installations, oil pipelines, electrical power stations/power lines, and the country’s infrastructure in general. They also attacked civilians and residential areas with car bombs, explosive belts, and booby traps, assassinating persons randomly or according to their names or tribal affiliations. In addition, they struck army camps and air bases with mortars and Katyusha rockets, attacked convoys moving along highways, and set up false checkpoints. Moreover, these terrorists, who also deal in the drug trade that operates in the region, undertook an armed rebellion in Fallujah and Najaf, seeking protection in the midst of civilians. Currently, we see the same activities in the northern province of Mosul and the southern province of Basra, as well as in the relatively inaccessible mountainous areas of Afghanistan.

**The Role of Intelligence in Combating Terrorism**

The actions of insurgents differ in five substantial ways from those of combatants engaged in conventional war: “time, civilian-military ‘duality,’ tactics, logistics, and centers of gravity.”

In Iraq, in particular, terrorism differs from that seen elsewhere by virtue of the despicable actions perpetrated, the targets attacked, the terrorists’ melting away among civilians, and their forcible use of civilian houses during operations or skirmishes. These factors underscore the importance of assembling accurate intelligence, and airpower offers an important means of such information gathering. Additionally, reliable intelligence enables an air force to perform its missions effectively with the necessary accuracy in terms of time and place. No planning for any military operation—whether in the air, on land, or at sea—can be successful without exact information concerning the enemy, terrain, and so forth. When we combat terrorism, intelligence increases in importance. In my opinion, it becomes three-quarters of the battle. Without proper targeting data, the army and its firepower stumble, accomplishing nothing; people die; and many resources go to waste. The right information, however, allows us to use less force and effort to conduct decisive attacks against terrorist targets—and suffer fewer casualties in terms of lives and equipment. Thus, by taking the initiative, we could weaken the morale of terrorists and strengthen that of our forces.

Fixed-wing aircraft, helicopters, remote-controlled aircraft, satellites, and balloons can play effective roles in gathering information by means of surveillance and reconnaissance. In spite of its small number of aircraft and limited capability, the IqAF has contributed to this effort by undertaking praiseworthy reconnaissance missions involving the detection and pursuit of oil smugglers, thereby helping ground forces realize their objectives. However, we have not yet attained the level to which we aspire in terms of gathering generally accurate information and intelligence. This is true not only of the Iraqis but also of the coalition forces throughout Iraq. For example, many times Iraqi and coalition forces have gone after targets and either found nothing or arrived too late—and our aircraft have erroneously hit the wrong targets. In the meantime, terrorists strike Baghdad’s Green
Zone, the center of government and location of foreign embassies, hitting important headquarters and bases with relative impunity. They assail these targets from nearby areas within shooting range of coalition and Iraqi forces, despite our balloons and other means of detection. So our monitoring system remains ineffective, and our intelligence apparatus unsuccessful, insufficient, inaccurate, and unable to ascertain and combat the methods of the terrorists. Clearly, all parties should address this dilemma in terms of means, methods, personnel, management, command, and completion of missions without wasting time and effort.

Despite the aforementioned circumstances, we have seen a fair amount of progress in both American and Iraqi intelligence, in the methods utilized by coalition forces, and in their cooperation with air forces to eliminate al-Zarqawi and other terrorist leaders. Similarly, the Iraq Air Force has benefited from US military aid and training in modern US reconnaissance aircraft capable of sending information and aerial images—night and day, under various weather conditions—to ground stations, units, and planes that conduct air strikes. Furthermore, we are encouraged by the willingness of individuals in “awakening councils” throughout Baghdad and the provinces to inform Iraqi and coalition forces about the terrorists’ movements. Nevertheless, much work remains in terms of enhancing the capabilities of coalition forces and the Iraq Air Force, improving training, and clarifying doctrine.

Future Horizons

Maj Kenneth Beebe, USAF, notes that “the lack of doctrine has nothing to do with the lack of airpower’s and space power’s applicability [to COIN but that] decisions on the types of weapons systems procured can and should be influenced by COIN doctrine.” Certainly airpower plays important roles, including surveillance, reconnaissance, CAS, and supporting communications. But these roles will not attain the desired performance level without clear doctrine, which requires distilling lessons from experience, thoroughly examining them, incorporating them into training through special counterterrorism programs, conducting exercises, writing pamphlets and publications, and tapping the experience of senior field commanders who have combated terrorism and experienced all of its features. So we have to revise the training system and give sufficient attention to counterterrorism operations in terms of practical exercises and theoretical studies that include the methods, procedures, and art of conducting battle movements. Importantly, we must prepare the entire force because the new Iraqi military does not yet possess sufficient expertise in the type of warfare now waged in Iraq.

Air Force Doctrine for Combating Terrorism

After examining terrorist methods, we should know what we need in the air forces of Iraq, Afghanistan, and the coalition—or in any other air force expected to combat terrorism. The first requirement that comes to mind—selecting the necessary weapon systems—derives from adopting a counterterrorism doctrine and then implementing it. If we rule out the role of air defense at this stage, particularly for the Iraq Air Force, we will tend to acquire aircraft meant to provide CAS, including not only helicopters but also reconnaissance and remote-controlled planes equipped with systems for communicating with ground units. Aircraft would operate in accordance with an easy, automated, well-known system and would require joint planning and coordination with land units at multiple levels—that is, with battalions as well as higher commands. As Dr. Searle reasons, “Because of the decentralized nature of counterguerrilla operations, we need to push air-liaison elements (real air planners, not just enlisted tactical air controllers) down to lower ground headquarters.” This policy would apply to both the USAF and Iraq Air Force. Once both air forces effectively integrate with each other via command and control systems and possess communications gear suited to controlling and guiding aircraft from the ground
or from helicopters, all parties will need to adhere to the new operating doctrine.

**Coordination with US Airpower**

We need effective coordination, joint cooperation, and dynamic interaction between the USAF and the IqAF on the one hand, and between the IqAF and US Army aviation on the other. We must do this in order to provide the necessary facilities for conducting battles, exchanging intelligence, conducting domestic and foreign training, providing logistical support, and performing search and rescue operations. Since the IqAF still lacks these capabilities, it is not fully effective at combating terrorism. Coordination is essential because we are all fighting the same worldwide battle against a common enemy—international terrorism.

**Coordination among Iraqi Forces**

The IqAF needs more effective coordination and liaison at all levels with forces that specialize in combating terrorism, as well as with ground forces. More precisely, we require forces capable of moving quickly after receiving accurate intelligence, utilizing helicopters or ground vehicles, depending on the circumstances. This calls for coordination as well as the use of advanced aerial equipment and wireless communication. For example, to protect the pipeline between Kirkuk and Mosul, we need to station well-trained forces at a nearby base and employ reconnaissance planes and other sensors to patrol and monitor this area. Such platforms would send confirmed information about terrorist movements to ground forces, who would then conduct a quick analysis and relay it to troops located at the aforementioned base; they in turn would fly to the suspected locations via helicopter to attack the terrorists, killing them if they resist or attempt to flee.

Raising another subject worth mentioning from the viewpoint of individual safety and security, I believe that my experience in Iraq confirms that the military forces, police, and guards who protect oil pipelines and other vital installations should not come from the local population or area. The fact that they are well known to others could subject them and their families to threats and even death, a fate that has befallen many people. Additionally, despite the large numbers of security forces assigned and the small enemy presence, certain local police forces and army soldiers in various sectors have clearly proven ineffective—witness the destruction of installations, pipelines, and electrical power lines as well as the poor performance of police forces in the provinces of al-Diwaniyah, Basra, and other areas in Iraq.

**Role of Air and Space Forces in Combating Terrorism**

Air and space forces can effectively combat terrorism if they have modern technology and very advanced aircraft flown by expert, well-trained pilots. Examples include conducting reconnaissance and air strikes with remotely controlled aircraft equipped with night vision equipment and precise aiming instruments capable of locating the target, distinguishing it, and accurately hitting it in all types of weather. This would go a long way toward destroying the morale of terrorists. Coalition forces in Iraq have already used these planes. Regarding this matter, Dr. Searle suggests that "we . . . bring our space-based concept down to the counterguerrilla level by deploying persistent aerial [intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance] platforms that provide similar wide-area coverage focused on the specific signatures of these weapons. The air platforms could take the form of tethered blimps, unmanned aerial vehicles, or manned aircraft. Whatever the system, it would have to provide the location of the enemy weapon that fired."

We should use light, simply constructed ground-attack aircraft such as T-6s or L-39s. The T-6s, for example, "proved their worth as superb counterinsurgency aircraft in French, British, Portuguese, and South African hands..."
for decades after World War II. The T-6s were cheap and readily available. Their slow speed and long loiter time made them excellent aircraft for observing artillery fire or for spotting small terrorist bands from the air and marking targets for strike aircraft. In addition to their good maneuverability and the accurate, modern weapons and targeting systems they carry, such planes are better suited for these missions than are the expensive ground-attack aircraft that fly at supersonic speeds yet require much maintenance and fuel.

These light planes—equipped with navigation and targeting instruments effective during day/night and all weather conditions, weapons such as advanced laser-guided missiles and cannons, and systems enabling contact with ground units—would prove formidable in the fight against terrorists. We need reconnaissance planes able to withstand Iraq’s desert climate and able to operate from short, unpaved runways. We also need light, easily maintained turboprop transport aircraft equipped with both side and rear doors and capable of carrying at least 40 soldiers, taking off from short, hastily constructed runways, and functioning under conditions that complex aircraft cannot tolerate.

Light attack helicopters can serve as effective counterterrorism platforms, provided they are maneuverable and can function in unusual environments and weather characteristic of desert and mountain areas. They should feature suitable weaponry and communications systems compatible with those possessed by ground units, sufficient space to transport antiterrorism forces, and enough mobility/flexibility to concentrate the needed volume of firepower. Furthermore, we must review our methods of using helicopters in Iraq in order to learn from errors that have led to casualties among both coalition forces and civilians.

I have barely touched upon the subject of communications systems, but during my past four years in the new IqAF, working with the USAF, I have seen the importance of communications in command and control as well as in directing fire at the enemy. Moreover, effective command of units and good planning are impossible without a communications system capable of consolidating control of the air effort in coordination with ground units and antiterrorist forces. We must establish control between units carrying out operations and those conducting air defense. We envision taking appropriate steps that will soon make the latter completely available in Iraq.) Further, we must emphasize close ties among ground, air, and naval forces via capable liaison officers (something needed in the IqAF and perhaps to some extent in the USAF) and conduct exchanges of such officers with their US counterparts at all levels, offering them special training and determining their role in the counterterrorism fight. Additionally, air controllers, who must become skillful and capable in their work with antiterrorism forces, need training in the system of frontline air control capable of communicating with aircraft and directing them to their targets in the battle arena.

We in the IqAF still suffer from shortages of air bases, logistical support, infrastructure, and personnel. The USAF should help us solve these problems and rapidly build up the IqAF so that it can take the initiative in combating terrorism and relieve the burden on the USAF by assuming many of the missions that it currently performs. Because of the importance of personnel to airpower, we must create innovative mechanisms for encouraging people to volunteer for the IqAF and must use the media to support this effort by conducting an awareness campaign throughout the country. We should establish safe and secure recruiting centers so that we can attract more volunteers who meet the criteria and qualifications specified in our regulations.

### Practical and Theoretical Training

We must have joint training with ground and antiterrorism forces, as well as training and cooperation with coalition forces, in order to exchange experiences and benefit from the superior expertise of the USAF in combating terrorism on all levels—from the training of pilots and technical personnel to positions in high command. I believe that IqAF person-
nel should be trained for the next four years outside Iraq until we prepare a complete group of specialists to work in our Air Force Academy so that it can do its job. At that point, we will have sound training in Iraq that will produce expert pilots, technicians, and specialists. In terms of exchange of expertise, however, elements of the IqAF should still participate in training exercises conducted by the North Atlantic Treaty Organization and other military organizations.

Conclusion

The use of airpower in combating terrorism requires us to think in new ways, employ new tools, and cooperate more fully. This unique mission calls for doctrine that facilitates the efficient employment of airpower. We must determine the most effective weapon systems for the task at hand. Small fixed-wing aircraft and light attack helicopters can ensure the relevance of airpower in this new mission. To attain strategic and tactical effectiveness, we must hone command and control functions among all branches of the US, coalition, and Iraqi forces to allow rapid coordination, joint cooperation, and dynamic interaction for airpower. Coalition and Iraqi forces should conduct ongoing joint exercises and personnel exchanges to refine tactics, improve procedures, and stay abreast of evolving terrorist methods. USAF personnel should also benefit from the experience of local air forces and their development, especially in Iraq and Afghanistan, in order to be able to carry out their assigned missions. This will prove helpful to the USAF because terrorism is a worldwide enemy whose activities cross all national borders.

Notes

3. Ibid.
5. Ibid., 20.

We must continue treating space as an operational domain by creating architectures and systems that allow us to provide the appropriate situational awareness and communications capability, giving strategic and tactical advantage to leadership at all levels.

—Air Force Posture Statement 2008