

The Airpower Advantage in Iraq

IN JUNE, the ongoing sectarian conflict in Iraq began to look less like a civil war and more like a traditional land war—a land war the Iraqi government was quickly losing to the terrorist organization known as ISIS or ISIL.

By August, enough was enough and President Obama authorized limited US air strikes, requested by the Iraqi government. Iraqi and Kurdish ground forces halted the ISIS advances and registered their first meaningful victories against the terrorists who had seized much of the country.

America's willingness to employ airpower to support Iraqi forces had an immediate and profound effect and may have turned the tide. The air strikes are "to support Iraqi security forces and Kurdish defense forces as they work together to combat ISIL," according to US Central Command, and "to protect critical infrastructure, US personnel and facilities, and support humanitarian efforts."

Although the employment was very limited, it happened. US fighter aircraft, Air Force bombers, and remotely piloted aircraft struck ISIS positions and allowed indigenous ground forces to take the initiative. This was a stark contrast to the events of June, when ISIS—outnumbered and at the time outgunned—rapidly swept Iraq's security forces aside and seized huge swathes of territory.

US intervention was triggered by the Mount Sinjar crisis, a potential humanitarian disaster alleviated thanks to USAF airpower. Some unknown thousands of refugees had fled marauding ISIS forces, seeking sanctuary on Mount Sinjar. For a short time the refugees were trapped.

In response, the President ordered the Air Force into action. "C-17 and C-130 aircrews began a coordinated series of humanitarian assistance airdrop missions to provide aid to the refugees," Army Lt. Gen. William C. Mayville Jr., Joint Staff operations director, explained Aug. 11.

All told, according to a USAF news release, the Air Force delivered the refugees near the Syrian border more than 114,000 meals and 35,000 gallons of water, with more than 100 pallets delivered a day.

Then air strikes helped break the siege. According to CENTCOM data, the

US launched 68 air strikes from Aug. 8 through 18. Six strikes per day seems inconsequential, but a little airpower can go a long way—as was seen around Mount Sinjar and the Mosul Dam.

Air Force F-15Es, F-16s, and MQ-1s, and Navy F/A-18s "have helped check the advance of ISIL forces," Mayville reported.

More than 60 intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance aircraft were overhead, and air strikes were "providing the Kurdish security forces with time to

ISIS was on a roll until the US moved to support Iraq with airpower.

fortify their defensive positions with the supplies they're receiving from the central government of Baghdad," he said.

Next came Mosul Dam. The dam is a decrepit but vital structure north of Mosul that was also under ISIS control. If destroyed, Mosul Dam's waters could have caused devastating flooding in Mosul (still ISIS-held) and as far as Baghdad. The ISIS defenders were in protected positions.

ISIS has a large inventory of useful military equipment, much of it abandoned by the Iraqi security forces who fled the terrorists. According to CENTCOM, on Aug. 17 alone 14 air strikes "damaged or destroyed 10 ISIL armed vehicles, seven ISIL Humvees, two ISIL armored personnel carriers, and one ISIL checkpoint."

By "the end of the second day of their ground offensive, backed by Iraqi troops and US air strikes, the Kurdish forces had wrested back control of the fragile dam and driven out militants," *The Wall Street Journal* reported.

In the short-term, ISIS forces are now faced with a choice. The fighters can continue to operate like a field army and face near-certain destruction from the air if or when the US chooses to engage them, or they can disperse and try to melt into a population that despises them. There are already signs ISIS is choosing the latter, although this makes it much more difficult for it to seize or hold territory—let alone create a new Islamic state.

A week's worth of battlefield successes enabled by US airpower do

not end Iraq's problems. ISIS is "very well-organized. They are very well-equipped," Mayville noted. "They coordinate their operations. And they have thus far shown the ability to attack on multiple axes. This is not insignificant."

Within Iraq, several institutional problems must still be addressed. First, Iraqi security forces were routed by ISIS, showing they lack the quality and discipline expected of them. A renewed US training and advisory mission may be necessary.

Second, as Obama has made clear, the US will not be Iraq's air force. The US can assist, as it did in August, but self-defense is ultimately up to the Iraqis.

Third, and most importantly, the political climate in Iraq must change. A critical step took place here, too, when Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki finally agreed to step aside after two terms and eight years in power. Maliki nurtured a harsh, majority rule government in Iraq—alienating ethnic and religious minorities and sowing the seeds of discontent that ultimately led to ISIS' incursion.

Peaceful, democratic transitions are a rarity in the Middle East, so Maliki stepping down is a huge step. For Iraq's good—and America's—the US should do everything it can to help ensure Iraq's next government is representative and inclusive.

"Americans have learned that it's harder to end wars than it is to begin them," Obama said in May. "Yet this is how wars end in the 21st century—not through signing ceremonies, but through decisive blows against our adversaries, transitions to elected governments, [and] security forces who take the lead and ultimately full responsibility."

Four months ago, Obama's words seemed a wishful-thinking declaration of victory for Afghanistan and Iraq. Now that the US has again militarily stood up for Iraq, the words have new relevance.

Lasting peace is much more likely if the US maintains influence and a presence in-country, and is willing to step up and provide military top cover. The Administration may have finally learned this in Iraq, and there is still time to secure a limited, useful, and lasting presence in Afghanistan. ■