

Humanitarian concerns loom; Retaking Mosul; Working the timeline; B-52 back in the fight

Iraq and Syria are the most well-known fronts in the air war against ISIS—with the US having conducted more than 6,500 strikes in Iraq and nearly 4,800 in Syria as of Aug. 30—but the battlefield has expanded. On Aug. 1, the US began air strikes against ISIS targets in Libya.

US aircraft launched 108 air strikes in Libya in that first month, according to US Africa Command data. And the strikes seem to have made a big impact: In early September, Libyan forces were poised to take back the city of Sirte from ISIS after roughly four months of fighting. Sirte was the terror group's stronghold in Libya.

In nearby Yemen, US forces have only been launching intermittent strikes, as Saudi Arabia leads the campaign against al Qaeda there. But the deteriorating humanitarian situation throughout the country and recent reports of Saudi Arabian air strikes hitting a school and a hospital have raised serious concerns in Washington about continued US military assistance to Saudi Arabia.

A bipartisan group of 64 members of Congress in late August urged President Barack Obama to postpone plans to sell \$1.15 billion worth of weapons to Saudi Arabia, noting in a letter penned by Rep. Ted Lieu (D-Calif.) that Amnesty International "has documented at least 33 unlawful air strikes by the Saudi Arabian-led coalition across Yemen that appear to have deliberately targeted civilians."

Rep. Adam Smith (D-Wash.), ranking member of the House Armed Services Committee, said in a written statement the US must "work with Saudi Arabia to ensure that Yemen does not become an established haven for al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, [ISIS], or any other terrorist organization; nor become a proxy for malign Iranian activities."

In a briefing with reporters at the Pentagon, Army Gen. Joseph L. Votel, head of US Central Command, addressed concerns about civilian casualties in Yemen, saying the US will "continue to emphasize to all the parties involved" in the conflict that everyone must minimize the chance of civilians being killed.

Votel also discussed plans for Iraqi forces to launch a campaign to retake Mosul by the end of the year; Defense Secretary Ashton B. Carter in April said he wanted to get forces in place before the start of Ramadan to wrest control of the northern Iraqi city from ISIS, but three weeks after the holy month had ended, Votel said there was no rush to get to Mosul.

However, at the Pentagon on Aug. 30, Votel asserted that he believes Iraqi forces are on track to launch the offensive before the end of the year.

"They own the timeline here for this ... but I think we are proceeding apace exactly where we hope to be at this particular time," Votel said.

In just a few weeks, ISIS "lost a hold" on Manbij, in Syria—which was liberated in mid-August—as well as border crossings in Syria and Iraq, Votel said, cutting off lines of communication and making it more difficult for the group to bring in new fighters.

"We are causing the enemy to have to look in multiple directions, and they are struggling to respond under this pressure," he said. "I do believe our approach, which requires that we work by, with, and through the indigenous forces, is working. We are making progress against [ISIS] in Iraq and Syria."

Still, he said, "there is much work ... to be done," and the fight will not be over when Mosul or the Syrian city of Raqqa is retaken.

"We will continue to deal with them," Votel said. "They will continue to adapt and we will continue to deal with the next evolution" of ISIS.

In an August visit to the US Central Command area of operations, Air Force Chief of Staff Gen. David L. Goldfein noted the importance of airpower in the continuing fight against ISIS. He stressed that it is "not about coalition partners following an American effort," but rather "Americans being part of ... an effective coalition that brings the best capabilities of each coalition partner to the campaign."

Goldfein said the B-52 is "back in the fight" in Afghanistan and for Operation Inherent Resolve, where as of mid-August, it had flown nearly 270 sorties since April. The aircraft is "contributing to a significant ground effort and dropping weapons in close proximity of friendly troops who are under attack," he said.

The Chief used the CENTCOM visit to tout the dependability of airpower.

"You can rely on your Air Force," he said. "We're going to fly to the sounds of the guns or we're going to die trying." 🇺🇸

Jennifer Hlad is a freelance journalist based in the Middle East and a former Air Force Magazine senior editor.

