

# Obama Administration Rules of Engagement Stymie Air War against ISIS



Refueling F/A-18 Hornet in mid-flight in air war against ISIS

Source: US Air Force

Without boots on the ground providing intelligence feed, the US led coalition air war is failing to “deter, let alone degrade” ISIS. How else can you explain 7,000 sorties over Syria and Iraq with less than 25% having ‘bomb releases’?

That was the key disturbing finding in a *Washington Times* (WT) article, [“U.S. bombers hold fire on Islamic State targets amid ground intel blackout.”](#)

The U.S. conducted 7,319 sorties over [Iraq](#) and Syria as part of Operation Inherent Resolve in the first four months of 2015. Of those, only 1,859 flights – 25.4 percent – had at least one “weapons release,” according to data provided by United States Air Force Central Command. That means that only about one in every four flights dropped a bomb on an Islamic State target.

There have been reports of frustration by US Air Force, Navy and Marine pilots engaged in the ISIS air campaign who have acquired targets and yet been commanded to stand down from attacking them. That has led to criticism of the Administration ISIS air war from Members of Congress, most notably, Sen. John McCain who heads the Senate Armed Services Committee cited in the WT report:

The Arizona Republican said at a hearing this year that missions that don’t drop bombs needlessly put American

pilots in danger and that U.S. boots on the ground would produce better intelligence that could lead to more effective bombing missions.

The level of air sorties in the US-led coalition air war is far below those of Gulf Wars I and II and even the Balkan Air campaigns during the Clinton era. The question is what is causing this? Many believe it is the restrictive rules of engagement to spare civilian lives, when ISIS fighters move among columns of civilians, effectively using them as human shields. Further, some analysts ironically believe that these strict rules of engagement actually contribute to civilian casualties by to ISIS. Perhaps this also reflects the misguided Obama Administration obsession in both avoiding collateral damage and avoiding putting special teams on the ground to provide better target intelligence.



Israel Air Force Commander Maj. Gen. Amir Eshel

Source: Times of Israel

Perhaps, the Central Command planners and air war commanders might best heed Israeli Air Force Commander Major General Eshel who was cited in a *Defense News* article [saying](#):

“We have an offensive capability that is unprecedented and extremely significant which we’ve been developing over years and are now able to implement.

“In small wars, it’s a very significant challenge for us to reduce collateral damage on the other side when the enemy is using all he has to elevate the damage we’re forced to inflict on him,” Eshel said.

“First of all, it’s a moral challenge. ... It sounds like a slogan, but we are constantly thinking, planning and operating with this challenge in mind.”

The demonstration of that approach was what occurred in Operation Defensive Edge against the Hamas rocket and terror tunnel war threatening Israel when the IAF F-16's flew missions in attacks against urban targets with precision guided 1 ton bombs within 250 meters of IDF troops. The key is precision strikes based on precise intelligence.

Note these debates about the Pentagon handling of the ISIS air war campaign in the *WT* article:

Former US Navy Helicopter Pilot, Cmdr. Harmer:

Without ground forces, argues Cmdr. [Christopher Harmer](#), a retired Navy helicopter pilot, U.S. airmen are essentially flying half-blind and, as a result, are returning to base with their bombs still in the bay.

"As long as the body politic or president or whoever is making decisions absolutely refuses to put American air controllers on ground, essentially pilots are flying with one eye closed," Cmdr. [Harmer](#) said. "It's almost impossible for pilots to designate between [Islamic State] fighters and coalition fighters."

Cmdr. [Harmer](#), who now serves as a senior naval analyst with the Middle East Security Project at the Institute for the Study for War, said airstrikes can hit big, static targets such as bridges, runways and tanks without on-the-ground guidance. But to be effective in hitting moving targets such as enemy troops in a firefight, U.S. pilots need American joint terminal attack controllers to give specific directions from the ground to guide their missiles precisely.

Fewer targets of opportunity says CENTCOM:

Col. Pat Ryder, spokesman for U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM), told reporters Friday that while pilots can often place bombs on targets "within minutes," it's very

important to be very precise and exercise tactical discipline to protect civilian populations.

“We’re dealing with a hybrid adversary who often hides among the population,” he said. “It’s more important for us to accurately target the enemy with a high degree of precision in order to minimize civilian casualties than it is to strike with such speed or force that would risk disenfranchising the very population we’re there to protect.”

**Richard Brennan of RAND Corporation has a more pragmatic assessment:**

But to make things work without a ground force and employing only air power, the rules of engagement must change, argues Richard Brennan, a senior political scientist at RAND Corp.

Mr. Brennan said the Islamic State, in adapting and responding to U.S. airstrikes, has started to intermingle its fighters with civilians to frustrate U.S. attacks from the air.

In an effort to protect civilian lives, the strict rules of engagement are doing the opposite by giving the Islamic State, also known as ISIS, the opportunity to kill civilians, he said.

“Even though the United States isn’t doing the killing, by its inability to use force in all but the cases where they’re sure of not having collateral damage, we’re ceding the advantage to ISIS in many situations,” Mr. Brennan said.

Looks to us that CENTCOM needs to whistle up a session with IAF General Eshel to understand how the Israelis do precision hits against Hamas in heavily urbanized Gaza City and Hezbollah Syrian missile and weapons transfers. Both Cmdr.

Harmer of the Institute for the Study of War and Brennan of the RAND Corporation are correct about the stringent rules for engagement in the air war against. They are generating more collateral civilian casualties. Something that didn't dawn on the Metternichean Munchkins in the Obama National Security Council who call the shots over Pentagon objections.