SLEDGE HAMMER TO CRACK A NUT?

Does air power have the accuracy to make it an effective tool against international terrorism?

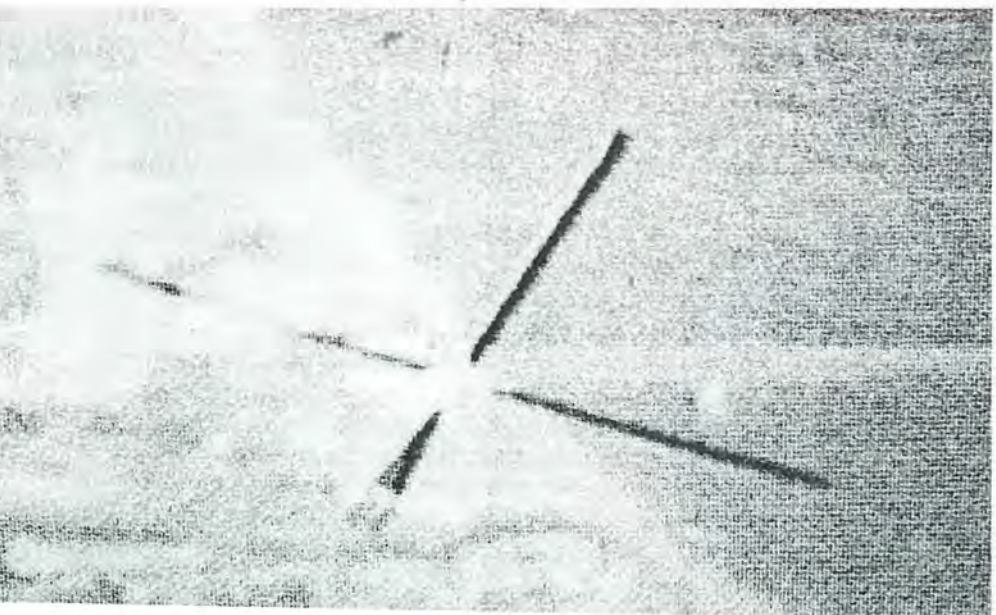
By Squadron Leader Carl Scott ACSC JSCSC Bracknell

It is the wish of every liberal democratic government faced with a violent threat it might characterise as 'terrorist' that an effective technological tool, precise and overwhelming, readily deployable and instantly recoverable, could be available to be employed against the plethora of irregular forces and asymmetric coercive activities to which such states are vulnerable. One need only look to the wealth of research, both technological and doctrinal, being conducted in Israel and the USA, to appreciate the resources being directed to the task. Whether such a tool as yet actually exists is the subject of this essay.

In order to clarify the question it is necessary first to analyse what is intended by the term 'terrorism' as there are many organisations which, by their very nature, are impervious to this form of attack and others which remain more vulnerable. The nature of the emergent technology, and how accurate it must be to be effective in this form of conflict, also arises: in contesting public opinion and political legitimacy any form of collateral damage may prove overwhelmingly damaging to government. The third element of the paper will then examine how and why such an instrument may be employed in this environment, along with the characteristics and constraints applicable to such force. Finally, I will examine the evidence of new doctrine. Major changes in military activity do not arise solely as a result of new technology; there must be an accompanying conceptual development. If there is a consensus that the improved accuracy, and subsequent employability, of air power is sufficient to make it effective, then there should be a commensurate formulation of new doctrine.[1]

What, in this context, is intended by the term 'terrorist'? For the purpose of this discussion I shall define the intended target as 'non-governmental bodies employing violence to achieve political aims'. This covers a broad spectrum of bodies, state sponsored (Abu Nidal) or anarchic (ALF), ideologically (Gamiya al Islamaya) or regionally based (UFF), heavily armed insurgent bodies capable of contesting control of territory with conventional military forces (Hizballah), solitary eccentrics distributing explosive devices in pursuit of personal demons (the Unibomber). All practise forms of irregular warfare, what was known as 'low intensity operations', forcing states to draw on their counter-insurgency doctrine to defeat them, combining policing with military force, social reform with coercion, developing specialist organisations for the acquisition of intelligence and rapid responses to threats as they manifest themselves. 'International' suggests only those bodies acting across borders, enjoying sponsorship or sanctuary in a second state. This greatly enhances the likelihood of the use of air power. It may be employed to effect denial or resources, or to destroy hostile forces as they gather to act on or escape from an incident (as the Israelis seek to do routinely in Southern Lebanon). Air power may be used coercively against the state offering a haven to terrorists (the essential function of Operation Grapes of Wrath, conducted by Israel in Lebanon in 1996)[2] or to change the behaviour of a state sponsoring terrorism (the US bombing activity in Libya in 1986 sought to achieve this result).[3] Very few states, however, would sanction the use of any form of air power within their own polity. Israel, keen to employ whatever resources it can in defeating Hizballah in Southern Lebanon, would never employ such obvious overwhelming force on Hamas within her own borders, just as the PIRA and UFF were never effectively engaged by the RAF. So it may be said that air power has little to offer to combat domestic terror but may be of use in combating extra-territorial threats.

The advances in technology that give rise to the hope of precision targeting are the guidance systems that place ever smaller munitions more precisely into the opponent. Much publicity surrounded their use during the Gulf War of 1991. There is a strong element of myth in this popular conception, as the continued survival of many of the targets selected for attack in Iraq between December of 1998 and the present day testify, along with the occasional protests as munitions land in housing estates and misidentified factory complexes. The quantum leap in capability, however, is in the command, control and intelligence cycles that support the bombing mission. Visitors to the



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command centre in Riyadh during Operation Desert Storm were astounded to see the entire air war, every asset, emitter and assigned target displayed in real time on a single colossal screen. The data required to maintain this picture was gathered by a fleet of specialised aircraft data-linked to this display, allowing absolute transparency to the commander and his staffs. This same technology, applied to sensors and rapid response forces in Southern Lebanon, allows the Israeli Air Force to respond to individual movements in the security zone, tracking the deployment of Katyusha rockets and responding swiftly with overwhelming force. However, unless major safeguards are in place, the system degrades and mistakes are made. The vulnerability of the State applying air power in the international political forum now arises: the perception of 'just and appropriate use of force' wanes if the innocent suffer. In Libya in 1986 President Reagan, in order to maximise coercive effect while minimising political repercussions for the US, insisted that all aircraft systems be fully serviceable with both radar and infrared targeting systems locked on to the assigned, military, targets before any weapons could be released. As a result, six of the seventeen F 1-11 bombers deployed and three of the fifteen A-6 attack aircraft returned with full weapon loads, having failed to meet the strict release criteria. In spite of this careful preparation bombs fell on the French Embassy and an adjacent block of flats killing up to 30 innocent people. The death of Colonel Qaddafi's adopted daughter within one of the designated targets further demonstrated the difficulty of achieving the intended moral effect. It is probable that Libyan sponsorship of terrorism did decline as a result of the raid, but the USA was seen in many European countries to have abandoned the moral high ground, meeting indiscriminate terror with indiscriminate terror.[4] The message is clear: however much the accuracy of the technology may evolve, the employment of so emotive a form of violence by a Nation-State will always demand a higher standard.

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If air power represents such a 'double-edged sword' why do Western governments so often seek to utilise it? From Bosnia and Iraq to Afghanistan and Sudan the US or US coalition forces have sought to employ air power, avoiding becoming embroiled on the ground. The desirability of air power is clear, as Cohen comments:

> ***'Air power is an unusually seductive form of military strength because, like modern courtship, it appears to offer gratification without commitment'.***[5]

But there is more to air power than this simple seduction. The advantages of immediate response, the capability to hit long range targets deep in enemy territory, the capability to quickly concentrate forces and firepower, the high kill capability of small forces, the capability for autonomous seamless operations and the lack of restraints of topography and layout[6] all give considerable advantage in the unequal struggle against an irregular force, lacking conventional infra-structure or identifiable centre of mass. The advantages of avoiding the vulnerability acquired by a force attempting to control the ground against an opponent who may be indistinguishable from the host population cannot be ignored, minimising as it does the targets available to an opponent, reducing the casualties that so readily sap the will of a democratic population to sustain a conflict[7] or draw the occupying force into a quagmire of escalating violence that destroys the legitimacy of the conflict, as the US learnt in the light of experience of the My Lai massacre by brutalised conscripts in Vietnam.[8]

The limitations of air power must also be acknowledged. In an urban environment where opponents are easily assimilated into the population, air power is unlikely to prove beneficial. Similarly, proximity to friendly forces is problematic (though attack helicopters routinely practice close support operations within 100 metres of friendly forces, these are relatively vulnerable assets working in ideal weather conditions without the blindness brought on by adrenalin in live operations. As

coalition experience in the Gulf War demonstrated, the same weapon systems are perfectly capable of engaging and destroying clearly identified friendly vehicles in broad daylight). Further degradation of these complex systems occurs under the simplest and most natural of circumstances: poor weather. In an environment where any friendly or innocent casualties have resonance at the Grand Strategic level it is inevitable that senior commanders and political masters should insist that a human element of responsibility is brought into the weapon release process. If the man in the cockpit cannot verify the target, then the mission is aborted. The alleged vulnerability of aerial platforms tends to be over-accentuated. Recent allied losses in missions over Bosnia and Iraq suggest that the overall air power system, incorporating offensive, defensive, intelligence dissemination and command assets is hardier than anticipated by its critics. Russian analysts, aware that the density of the Air Defence network around Baghdad in January 1991 was greater than that planned for the strategic target of Murmansk during the Third World War, were astounded at the ability of coalition aircraft to operate in the area with apparent freedom of manoeuvre. (Indeed during Op Maude, an SBS raid on optic fibre cables running from Baghdad to Basra, two RAF Chinooks were closed down on the ground while their crews drank tea and watched the attempts of Iraqi air defences to engage coalition bombers. On completion of the raid they started the helicopters and departed the area unchallenged.)

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As technology develops it is only absorbed by the military when doctrine has developed to engage it. The rapid expansion of information technology, along with propulsion and materials technologies, have led to an exponential rate of change in the technologies available to military planners. So does the conceptual effort exist to support its use? In a recent paper on the 'Revolution of Military Affairs'[9] Eliot Cohen attempts to categorise the US response to new technologies. 'The first category he identifies was championed by Admiral Owens, the former vice Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. This group attempted to address the 'architectural' and psychological transformations required to effect a transition from four competing services, wasting time and resources in needless manoeuvre and logistic efforts, to a single 'system of systems' that took all of the high data rate intelligence gathering and targeting systems and tied them into precision weapons to create a system that could dominate a conventional battle-field some 200 miles square with the optimum utilisation of contemporary technology. The resultant doctrine may have some use in subsequent reorganisation of forces, but is unlikely to generate a weapons system attractive to politicians requiring human accountability and transparency in a politically vulnerable environment like counter-terrorist operations. The second group he christens 'uncertain revolutionaries', enjoying the benefits of contemporary technology but reluctant to accept the crystalline perfection of the Admiral's 'system of systems'. This group he equates with a strong belief that the 'fog of war' and Clausewitzian 'friction' will always degrade performance. They also believe that modern technology, arising as it does from the civil research sector, is equally available to an opponent and is therefore likely to 'cancel out' in effect. The 'uncertain revolutionary' requires no doctrine to replace Clausewitz. The third group identified is 'Gulf War Veterans'. This group ascribes success to training and morale. They believe that success in recent conflict will drive potential opponents into

asymmetric responses at the extremes of the spectrum of conflict: terrorism and weapons of mass destruction. As such the threat is not inherently technological, nor should the response be so. It is the quality of manpower deployed that will determine the outcome of such conflict. Cohen's final category is the 'skeptics'. This group shares the 'Gulf veterans' fear of asymmetric responses, but not their triumphalism. The 'skeptic' has not forgotten the US defeat in Vietnam. He believes only in the impossibility of forecasting the next threat and the need, therefore, to remain alert to any potential opponent in any field. Whilst all of these groups, save perhaps the idealist Admiral Owens, are alert to the likelihood of unconventional threat, none are formulating doctrine for the employment of contemporary technology against it. Considerably more promise is offered by Israel in its strategically vulnerable environment, constantly testing new approaches in the laboratory of

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Southern Lebanon. Here the doctrine of 'Sophisticated Conventional Warfare' is finding fertile ground.[10] This approach seeks to insert precision systems into existing platforms whilst awaiting the opportunity for architectural reform of the overall system. The emphasis is clearly placed on command and control and the application of force by aerial platforms. The enemy is clearly defined as both conventional and insurgent, with revealed infrastructure and covert 'low intensity' groups. Further research at the Begin-Sadat Institute in Tel Aviv effectively places this theoretical work in the very real environment of the Southern Lebanon fighting Hizballah.[11] This embryonic doctrine indicates that Israel will lead the 'Revolution in Military Affairs' resulting from the development of new technology, enjoying as it does the conceptual framework required to employ it and the political will to do so.

It is clear that, notwithstanding the contradictions and limitations in attempting to apply brute force in a politically sensitive arena such as 'counter-terrorism' the technology is rapidly evolving to fulfil the role. The doctrine required to effect a 'Revolution in Military Affairs' is also under development and being tested in the villages of Lebanon. Whilst it is easy to believe that the combined effect of technology and intellect can only result in ever higher standards of force application, in compliance with the constraints expected in International Law, it is worth qualifying premature enthusiasm with the example brought out during an inquiry held in the UK Ministry of Defence into the destruction of two US Army Blackhawk helicopters over Northern Iraq by USAF F-15 Eagle fighter aircraft. Both helicopters were equipped with 'Indicator Friend or Foe' transmitters to ensure safe operation, both had large 'stars and stripes' painted on the side, both were flying on a notified route to ensure all fighters were aware of their presence, both were being monitored by a multi-million dollar airborne command and control platform which was also monitoring the activity of the two fighter aircraft which arrived in the area. The two fighter pilots interrogated the potential targets electronically, discussed the matter at length over the radio, flew in for a close visual inspection and then shot down both helicopters killing everyone board, including the commander of US Forces in the area. A deeply concerned Assistant Chief of the Air Staff asked the assembled board:

> *'Why did they think these were enemy helicopters?'*
> *It was a very brave, and now unemployed, Wing Commander who rose to his feet and said:*
> *'They didn't, sir. They thought it was a baby-milk factory.'*

As accurate as the technology may become, it is only a tool. It is the craftsman that must be educated.

NOTES

1 For a discussion of 'what drives warfare?', the links between doctrine and technology, see 'American Views of the Revolution in Military Affairs' E. Cohen. Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies, Middle-East Security and Policy Studies No. 28. P 4. Further discussion is available in 'Blitzkrieg' F. Miksche. Faber, London 1942. P 50-53.

2 The Limits of Coercion. Y. Sayigh in 'Lebanon on Hold' Ed Hollis and Shehadi. RIIA. 1996. P 42-46.

3 'Address to the Nation' April 14, 1986. R. Reagan. Quoted in Public Papers of the presidents. Ronald Reagan, 1986. P 469.

4 Coercive Diplomacy and Libya. T. Zimmerman in 'The Limits of Coercive Diplomacy' Eds George and Simons. 2nd Edition, Oxford 1994. P 216-7.

5 A Revolution in Warfare, E. Cohen. Foreign Affairs 75, 2, 1996. P 49.

6 The Vulture and the Snake: Counter-Guerrilla Air Warfare: The War in Southern Lebanon. S. Gordon. Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies, Tel-Aviv. MSPS Paper No. 39. July 1998. 3.2/3.3.

7 'Where are the Superpowers? At home with the kids.' Luttwak.

8 A full discussion of the moral and legal implications of My Lai is available in 'Vietnam and Nuremberg' P. Warnke in 'War' Ed Freedman. Oxford 1994. P 184-90.

9 As note 1.

10 Sophisticated Conventional Warfare. Z. Bonen. BESA MSPS No. 28. Tel-Aviv.

11 As note 6.