

Brian Glyn Williams. *Counter Jihad: America's Military Experience in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Syria.* Haney Foundation Series. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016. 400 pp. \$65.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8122-4867-8.

Reviewed by Daniel Marston

Published on H-Asia (April, 2018)

Commissioned by Sumit Guha (The University of Texas at Austin)

Brian Glyn Williams's *Counter Jihad: America's Military Experience in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Syria* offers a good and straightforward summary of the United States' experience in the Middle East and in the Afghanistan/Pakistan conflicts. Williams provides a clear outline and organized approach to a very complex subject, and is to be commended for tackling a very difficult topic in such a clear and coherent fashion. The book is intended for a wider, nonspecialist readership and provides an excellent primer for readers wishing to understand the complexity of the wars in the Middle East, especially since 1991.[1]

The book's organization is logical and self-explanatory. Chapter 1 covers a grand timespan briefly but thoroughly. This not only captures the wider debates, but also provides the reader the opportunity to delve deeper into those debates using the prodigious number of endnotes at the end of the book. The author dispels some common and long-standing misconceptions, including that links existed between al Qaeda and Saddam Hussein's regime prior to 9/11; or that the US intelligence services were caught unawares regarding the 9/11 attacks.

Chapter 2 offers a good summary of the initial operations in Afghanistan from the immediate post-9/11 period into 2002. I did hope to see the

author provide a bit more critical analysis of some of the Coalition's[2] key mistakes during this period—the most obvious examples being the Bonn Agreement[3] and the subsequent establishment of the Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan. The Coalition's planning and approach to “nation-building” in Afghanistan did not take into account the historical and ethnic dynamics of Afghanistan, and these omissions unfortunately laid the foundations of fundamental debates and schisms that exist to this day in Afghanistan.

Chapter 3 deals with the background for and “selling” of the Iraq war to the American people, and provides a detailed analysis of the many dubious claims and assertions perpetuated by the Bush administration. While some reviews have criticized the author for spending too much time on this issue, I believe he has done a valuable service to readers by providing such an in-depth and critical assessment of the actions of the decision-makers shaping the debate on whether to invade Iraq in 2003.

Chapter 4 covers the invasion and subsequent challenges of the Coalition's occupation of Iraq. This chapter provides a clear and useful chronology of this difficult period, although I did expect to see a more critical assessment of the “Surge” of

2007, based upon the analysis provided in other chapters. I was surprised that the author did not ask what the United States hoped to achieve with the invasion and whether it had asked the key question “to what end?” in formulating the plan.

Chapter 5 picks up the narrative of the war in Afghanistan from where chapter 2 left off, and tries to close out the US and NATO attempts to nation-build. This chapter includes a nice mix of narrative and analysis of the impact of operations in Pakistan on the war in Afghanistan, including a discussion of drone strikes and the raid to kill Osama bin Laden. The chapter ends with a summary of the current situation. Williams’s assessment is a little misguided in some of its language; for example, he comments on “the new American willingness to compromise on its ambitious goals for Afghanistan” (p. 256). This statement fails to address some of the fundamental flaws of the decision-making of 2001 and 2002—principally, the decision to impose a governmental and security apparatus upon the fledgling Afghan state without consideration of the historical and ethnic realities of the region. The United States and its Coalition partners entered into a civil war in Afghanistan in 2001 for short-term aims and without interrogating its own long-term goals; we are still living with the aftermath of this short-sighted decision-making, in both Iraq and Afghanistan.

Chapter 6 deals with the rise of ISIS across the Middle East and into Europe. As with earlier chapters, it does a good job of summarizing some of the key issues and debates, and the endnotes cover some of the relevant readings and articles. I did sense that Williams was critical of US policymakers’ delay in getting involved again in Iraq, or intervening formally in Syria. I had expected, from previous chapters, that this discussion would have highlighted the understandable hesitancy of policymakers and military commanders to re-engage in the region, given the aforementioned absence of coherent and rigorous strategies to aid decisions about intervening in a civil war in

Afghanistan in 2001, and invading and toppling the Ba’athist regime in Iraq in 2003.

While this book fulfils the task of providing a good overview of the US wars in the Middle East and Afghanistan/Pakistan since 1991, I felt that it was missing two components. The first is a bibliography. While the endnotes provide valuable sources, an introduction and history such as this would benefit greatly from having a simple bibliography. This would allow the readers to delve deeper into the debates and discussions covered by the author. The second is a short conclusion to tie together the various strands that the author has laid out.

Overall, this book is a good resource, one that clearly presents the very complex issues that have erupted with the deployment of the US military to the Middle East and Afghanistan/Pakistan since 1991. I recommend it for people wishing to better understand the history, the debates, and the conflicts that have shaped this region.

Notes

[1]. The author of the review has spent considerable time in Iraq and Afghanistan over the last twelve years.

[2]. The United States, NATO, and the European Union.

[3]. United Nations Security Council, “Agreement on Provisional Arrangements in Afghanistan Pending the Re-establishment of Permanent Government Institutions (Bonn Agreement),” May 12, 2001, text available at <https://peacemaker.un.org/afghanistan-bonnagreement2001>.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <https://networks.h-net.org/h-asia>

Citation: Daniel Marston. Review of Williams, Brian Glyn. *Counter Jihad: America's Military Experience in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Syria*. H-Asia, H-Net Reviews. April, 2018.

URL: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=48768>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.