



**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** Heather P. Venable

**Published on** H-War (December, 2017)

**Commissioned by** Margaret Sankey (Air University)

If seeking a synthesis of the Global War on Terror for undergraduates, then look no further than Brian Glyn Williams's *Counter Jihad: America's Military Experience in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Syria*. Williams writes clearly and provides a useful blend of political- and military-level strategy. He does some of his best work, as seen previously in *Predators: The CIA's Drone War on Al Qaeda* (2013), when he shows both sides of an argument before moving to dispel what he believes to be common misconceptions of the American public.

Williams is an assistant professor of Islamic civilization at the University of Massachusetts, Dartmouth. His research focuses more specifically on current conflicts in Muslim lands, and he has written previously about Afghanistan, to include Uzbek General Abdul Rashid Dostum and his relationship with US Special Forces in the initial phases of Operation Enduring Freedom. He has also conducted field research and produced scholarship on other contested areas, including the Crimea and Chechnya. He has not hesitated, moreover, to proffer policy advice, including the suggestion in 2014 that Barack Obama send air force combat controllers and other US troops to call in air strikes in order to help indigenous forces to defeat Syrian President Bashar al-Assad. [1] Still, one might expect less sweeping general-

izations of Afghan tribes, such as when he describes Pashtuns as extremely conservative as opposed to far more moderate and reasonable Tajiks and other northern tribes. By contrast, he has more sympathy for Iraqi and Syrian Sunnis who support ISIS, explaining that they can look past the terror of ISIS because they hunger for a "Sunni jihadi empowerment movement" (p. 318).

Williams begins by giving context that goes as far back as the first-century Jewish rebellion against Roman occupation to provide readers with a long *durée* approach to the Middle East, albeit suitably brief. This approach helps to provide the work's target audience—undergraduates who may have only a cursory familiarity with the region—with deeper context to understand some of the region's challenges. Readers of H-War, however, might not find this work as helpful for their own understanding. Among other flaws, there is no bibliography that allows the reader to understand the kind of works that are shaping his interpretations unless one parses the endnotes. He might argue that this is unnecessary given his "unique front-row perspective" on these conflicts, to include serving as an "expert witness" during trials at Guantanamo Bay (p. xiv). But whatever insights he might have gleaned he rarely incorporates them into the book. When he does, they are

indeed very intriguing, such as a stint in Afghanistan in 2007 analyzing suicide bombers for the Central Intelligence Agency, which he describes in two pages. He also seems to have arrived at a more positive assessment of drones' strategic effectiveness; in *Predators*, by contrast, he built a strong case for the operational and tactical effectiveness of drones even as he then compellingly argued against their strategic effectiveness.

H-War readers also will most certainly be disappointed if they expect the work to live up to the promise of its title to provide insights into the "military experience" of the United States in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Syria. Williams's work is far more synthetic, staying at the strategic level. He provides, for example, a relatively truncated overview of the initial destruction of the Taliban government in Afghanistan in only sixteen pages. Indeed, he does not even begin analyzing the US military experience in Iraq until page 169. This is in large part because he spends about one-sixth of the book railing against how the Bush administration concocted a case for declaring war in the first place. Although Williams finds faults with Republican and Democratic administrations alike, he spares no ink eviscerating President George W. Bush's decision. Characterizing the reasoning behind OIF (Operation Iraqi Freedom) as one of the "biggest lies in American history," Williams warns readers that those wanting to read a "narrative of combat operations in the War on Terror may want to skip to the following chapter" (p. 104). As he acknowledges, though, previous works have already "demolished the link between Iraqi WMD and Al Qaeda," which is another reason why this work seems to be best suited for the classroom (p. 160).

Despite some faults, educators should consider this well-written book for undergraduates primarily because of its accessibility. Students who have only glimpsed bits and pieces of the decisions surrounding whether or not to wage war

and the subsequent challenges of forging a victorious strategy will gain a deeper sense of the military and political debates surrounding these conflicts.

#### Note

[1]. Brian Glyn Williams, "Op-Ed: Want to Beat the Islamic State? Try the Afghan Model, Circa 2001," *Los Angeles Times*, October 4, 2014, <http://www.latimes.com/nation/la-oe-1005-williams-islamic-state-combat-controlle-20141005-story.html>.

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

**Citation:** Heather P. Venable. Review of Williams, Brian Glyn. *Counter Jihad: America's Military Experience in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Syria*. H-War, H-Net Reviews. December, 2017.

**URL:** <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=50844>



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