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## Counter Jihad: America's Military Experience in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Syria

By Brian Glyn Williams

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It has long been a truism that journalists write the “first draft of history.” In many ways this is true. Yet as is the case with all early reports, whether they come from a light infantry scout platoon, a Special Forces unit conducting strategic reconnaissance, or initial assessments of satellite or voice intercepts, the initial reports of journalists are often just that, “first drafts.” History, solid history, requires time.

There are several reasons for this, easily understood upon brief reflection. First, it takes time to assemble the vast quantities of information needed to write a solid work of history. Second, time allows the passions of the moment to fade and hopefully provides the scholar the chance to examine any issue or era with something approaching neutrality. Participants themselves become less engaged, and hopefully with mellowing (and the judicious assistance of personal notes that might have been written at the time) can themselves see the events they witnessed with a more critical eye. And finally, of course, when dealing with military history there is the issue of declassification of documents, a critical element when trying to reconstruct a cohesive and hopefully comprehensive account of events. For all of these reasons academic military historians generally consider “real” history impossible for at least 20–25 years after the events took place.

In *Counter Jihad* Brian Glyn Williams is deliberately attempting to split the difference between the “first draft” of history and pure history itself. In effect his book is a serious attempt to write a “second draft of history.” In this it appears he has done solid work, as far as it can be done at this point. As an individual, Williams is in a somewhat curious position, but one that places him well in undertaking such a work. An academic (a professor of Islamic History at the University of Massachusetts) he understands the rigorous requirements that must apply to any serious work of academic scholarship. As a former contract employee of the CIA, tasked with tracking suicide bombers in Afghanistan in 2007, he understands both the military culture and the environment of war at several levels. As a professor who believes in being a teacher not just being an academic confined to mere research he also had a personal motivation: many of his students today were grade school children on September 11, 2001 and have no real idea of what happened through much of the first decade of this century.

It is worth quoting his stated objective in part: “My aim is to shine a retrospective light on the wars in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Syria in order to ‘historicize’ the disparate events once collectively known as the War on Terror. The objective is to weave all these disjointed stories together into one accessible narrative that tells us how we got to the point where ISIS conquered an area in the Middle East larger than Britain or Israel with eight million people living under its rule.”

In this Williams has made quite a good start. There are, of course, gaps that may leave some dissatisfied. These, like all works, are as much a product of the person writing the book as they are of the perceptions of the readers.

Williams' personal experiences in Afghanistan came in no small part from his experience as an expert on Islamic culture and history but also as a product of one of his earlier books, a biography on Afghan leader Abdul Rashid Dostum. It is perhaps as a result of this that his coverage of Iraq is less in-depth than some might like. The run-up to the war in Iraq is explained in detail, most especially the politically motivated manipulation and deliberate misreading of Iraqi capabilities in NBC issues and blatant lies regarding ties between al-Qaeda and Iraq. But post-Invasion Iraq, essentially the core of the war there between 2004–10, is glossed over in just 52 pages. Though I would also suggest that this may be at least a little understandable since a real study would require a book some 1,000 pages longer at least. (For this we shall have to wait for the Center of Military History to produce the Tan Books.)

All in all, the book holds up well. Not as detailed as works such as Tom Ricks' *Fiasco*, nor as lightweight as some other brief accounts of either war. For the specifics of military campaigns or battles during our longest wars one should look elsewhere. But if you are trying to find a decent single-source narrative of how we got here, *Counter Jihad* accomplishes much of its stated intent, to present a concise single source "second draft" of history.