

# Why Did The Pentagon Use The B-2 Against Terrorists?

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***A B-2 stealth bomber from the 509th Bomb Wing at Whiteman Air Force Base takes off to conduct precision airstrikes on Jan. 18, 2017 destroying four ISIS camps 45 kilometers southwest of Sirte.***

***USAF***

A pair of U.S. Air Force B-2s leveled two ISIS training camps in Libya on Jan. 18. The mission marked the first time the “stealth bombers” had been used in combat since the opening of the Libyan air campaign in March 2011, raising questions about why the costly, low-observable aircraft were employed for targets lacking sophisticated air defenses.

The aircraft dropped 108 precision-guided bombs on jihadists who had recently arrived after being routed in the Libyan coastal city of Sirte, 30 mi. northeast of the camps. The militants who survived the bomb run were “cleaned up” by UAVs wielding Hellfire missiles. An estimated 85 terrorists, who Defense Secretary Ash Carter noted were “actively plotting operations in Europe,” were killed in the strikes.

The two nuclear-capable bombers flew non-stop from Whiteman AFB in Missouri, refueling at least five times during their 30-hr. round trip. Carter said the strikes were intended to deliver “the lasting defeat it [ISIS] deserves.” The mission also marked a spectacular end to an administration that has made long-range airstrikes against terrorists a pillar of its defense strategy.

Most of the commentary surrounding the action has centered on why the U.S. employed such advanced strike assets in a seemingly permissive air defense environment. Air Force Operations and Support spending data from fiscal 2015 show the Operational Cost per Flight Hour (OCPFH) of the B-2 at \$128,805 in then-year dollars, compared to \$58,488 for the B-1 and \$67,005 for the B-52. Why then use the bomber with the highest OCPFH?

Some news outlets have reported that Washington was sending a message. The Libyan general Khalifa Haftar, who has been fighting the Tripoli-based government supported by the U.S. and UN, recently visited Russia's Admiral Kuznetsov aircraft carrier in the Mediterranean Sea where he reportedly received a promise of weapons and financial support. The strike may have been meant to dissuade General Haftar from deepening this friendship and encourage him to join the Tripoli government. Other sources have called it a parting message from the administration to Russia and China, showing them the destruction that can be wrought by each of the U.S. Air Force's 20 B-2s.

Another possibility is the B-2 was the most cost-effective way to accomplish this particular strike, which apparently necessitated delivering 108 independently targeted weapons. In the mid-2000s, the B-2 fleet was upgraded with the Smart Bomb Rack Assembly (SRBA), which allows each bomber to carry 80 GBU-38s— the 500-lb. version of the Joint Direct Attack Munition (JDAM) GPS-guided bomb family. B-52s can only carry 12 each and are currently being upgraded to carry 24. B-1s can only carry 15. Fighters unsurprisingly cannot match the B-2's payload and suffer a bigger range penalty for every bomb they carry because the aircraft are lighter and carry weapons externally, where they create lots of drag.

The cost difference between using the different bombers may also be less than the OCPFHs would lead one to believe. The marginal cost of operating an aircraft is not as simple as the OCPFH multiplied by the length of the mission. A significant portion of the OCPFH consists of annual, fixed costs that do not increase with additional usage, such as unit maintenance personnel and continuing system improvements. When one considers only the costs affected by utilization—such as operating material, depot-level maintenance and field spares—the B-2 costs an additional \$30,000 per flight hour, not \$60,000-70,000.

Additionally, all pilots, even those that fly the expensive B-2, need a certain amount of flight time a year to maintain proficiency, accumulated either through training missions or real operations. And B-2 crews do periodically practice long-distance strikes from Whiteman. If there were a large number of terrorist structures in need of demolition and a flight crew in need of cockpit time, the B-2 could have been allocated for the strikes with no budget impact.

One more potential rationale is the B-2's sophisticated sensors. Designed in the 1980s to deliver nuclear warheads against mobile targets protected by the Soviet Union's formidable air defenses, B-2s are equipped not only with broadband stealth but also with radars that detect and generate images of ground targets from over 100 mi. away. After the Cold War, GPS-guided weapons were integrated and the radar was made capable of updating the target coordinates in-flight. From 2007 to 2012, the passive electronically scanned arrays of these radars were replaced with active electronically scanned arrays. If the mission called for a radar especially capable at detecting targets or generating high-resolution images from long ranges to independently retarget GPS-guided bombs, these criteria would also justify employing "the world's most technologically advanced strategic bomber" against America's most technologically unsophisticated opponents.