

Lessons from a Forgotten War

by [Robert Satloff \(/experts/robert-satloff\)](/experts/robert-satloff)

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Robert Satloff \(/experts/robert-satloff\)](/experts/robert-satloff)

Robert Satloff is executive director of The Washington Institute, a post he assumed in January 1993.



Articles & Testimony

How America's first foray into the modern Arab world can help solve its current entanglements.

U. S. troops to North Africa...Fighting in Benghazi...Scandal over the president's handling of crisis in the Middle East...

These themes sound like they were lifted from the presidential foreign-policy debate between Mitt Romney and Barack Obama. In fact, they are echoes of events that occurred 70 years ago next week, when American forces, along with their British allies, launched Operation Torch, the largest amphibious assault in history at the time and America's first foray into the uncertain terrain of the modern Arab world.

Circumstances were, of course, very different from what they are today. The world was at war and North Africa was a critical front in the global conflict. France, the region's main colonial power, held sway in Morocco, Algeria, and Tunisia. Its collaborationist Vichy government, headed by Marshal Philippe Petain, worked closely with Nazi Germany. To the east, Fascist Italy controlled Libya, where Benghazi was a key target of back-and-forth fighting between Italian and British troops.

Torch, an operation few recall today, was the beginning of the end of World War II. Until that point, the allies were on defense; Torch was the first major U.S.-led offensive operation of the war. U.S. President Franklin Delano Roosevelt and British Prime Minister Winston Churchill decided that the effort to defeat Adolf Hitler, smash the Axis, and free Europe would begin on North African shores that had not seen U.S. troops since the days of the Barbary Corsairs in the early 19th century. The result was that from November 1942 to May 1943, the most important territory in the European theater of war was in Arab lands. This is where hundreds of thousands of Americans -- led by generals named Eisenhower, Patton, Bradley, and Clark -- had their first taste of real battle.

Today, there are few reminders left that American soldiers, sailors, airmen, and marines once crisscrossed the region. Moreover, today's Middle East politics -- the empowerment of the Muslim Brotherhood, the emergence of vast

numbers of salafis, the spread of jihadist cells and the still unfinished conflicts between rulers and ruled -- owes little to that brief but pivotal moment of American dominance. Still, decision-makers looking for solutions to the problems that confound the United States in the Middle East today would be wise to consider these five lessons from an American military engagement in the Arab world that was both among our most consequential and our most fleeting.

The importance of strategy: To many people, it made little sense to attack Casablanca, Algiers, and Oran at a time when it appeared as though the real fight was with the Germans across the English Channel. But Roosevelt and Churchill had a grand strategy to win the war. They understood that sound tactical decisions often meant that the shortest distance between two points was not a straight line, and that expending blood and treasure in North Africa so that Allied troops could cross to Italy and attack the soft underbelly of Axis-controlled Europe might be the most effective way to achieve victory.

Today, the urgency of defining a global strategy -- and determining where the Middle East fits within it -- still applies. Despite all the talk about the need to tilt America's strategic attention to Asia, it is impossible to wish away the threats and dangers emanating from the Middle East.

The contemporary Middle East analogue to Roosevelt and Churchill's strategy of using North Africa as a gateway to eventual victory in Europe is the Syria conflict and its link to the strategic competition against Iran. Like snatching North Africa from the Axis, toppling President Bashar al-Assad is likely to be an effective, if indirect, way to strike a blow against the ayatollahs. Achieving that goal has strategic consequences for which the United States should be willing to invest more assets -- and take more risks - than it is doing today.

The certainty of unintended consequences: The allies took less than four days to secure their objectives in Torch, quickly silencing Vichy guns along the Atlantic and Mediterranean coasts and roaring overland toward Tunisia. However, the North African campaign did not end with that swift and decisive Allied victory. To the contrary, the Anglo-American success convinced Hitler that he needed to stop the enemy advance before the Allies could make the leap across the Mediterranean to southern Europe. The result was the German invasion of Tunisia on Nov. 8, 1942. Within days, this led to a full-fledged Nazi occupation -- including the dispatch of thousands of Jews to forced labor camps -- and a grinding six-month battle between Allied and Axis forces for control of that tiny country at the northern tip of the African continent.

In today's Middle East, unintended consequences abound. Success against "al Qaeda central" did not end the threat of violent Sunni extremists, it only triggered a transformation that has seen al Qaeda affiliates sprout up from Mali to Benghazi to Sinai. And the heady optimism of Tahrir Square, praised by American leaders as an echo of the ideals of Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Jr. was the prelude to the Islamization of Arab politics, not the coming of a new Arab liberal age. The lesson -- which is not limited to the Middle East, of course -- is that one celebrates the first signs of triumph at one's peril. Real success takes time and persistence, and is often littered with losses and setbacks along the way.

Prioritizing is messy and even sordid -- but essential: Operation Torch had its own explosive political scandal -- the agreement ironed out by U.S. commanders and diplomats with the ranking Vichy officer in Algeria, Adm. Francois Darlan, to leave the pro-fascist, virulently anti-Semitic regime in place in exchange for safe passage of Allied troops across North Africa. Under this agreement, U.S. officers watched in silence as Vichy officers jailed the leaders of the largely Jewish underground network in Algiers who had risked their lives to make possible the allied entry into the city.

Roosevelt came under a barrage of criticism, especially from within his own party, for cutting what was derisively termed the "Darlan Deal," but he stayed the course. The president said he would "walk with the devil" himself to

enable Allied troops to take the battle directly to the Germans in Tunisia, thereby shortening the war and saving American lives.

Prioritizing competing interests -- which in practice often means maintaining distasteful double standards -- is a fact of life for great powers, especially in times of war and conflict, as is the case in the Middle East today. While principle should define policy whenever possible, expediency is often deemed necessary. The key is not to let expediency become the "new normal." After Torch, it took a long, agonizing year, but Vichy's anti-Semitic laws were finally repealed in North Africa. Roosevelt's Pentagon famously decided not to bomb the railways to Auschwitz, but uneasiness with the Darlan Deal may have played a role in the decision to seek unconditional surrender from Nazi Germany.

In today's Middle East, for example, the United States opposes the spread of radical Sunni extremism. However, Washington still supports the radical Sunni extremists who govern Saudi Arabia and Qatar because of our larger interests in energy and the need to counter the threat of a hegemonic Iran. A lesson from Torch is that this emphasis on security interests should not forever trump the need to speak up loudly and forcefully on issues of principle, such as the values of personal freedom, free speech, and religious tolerance. America needs to find a time, a place, and a way to assert all its interests.

Gratitude will be fleeting, if it exists at all: Seventy years ago, Allied troops roared through North Africa and ended the occupation of local countries by the Vichy French, Nazi Germans and Fascist Italians. The cost was thousands of American dead, including the 2,841 laid to rest in the pristine grounds of the 27-acre U.S. military cemetery near Carthage; the names of another 3,724 are chiseled in stone as "missing." Some locals -- especially those who suffered personally under Axis rule -- were grateful for this sacrifice. However, the views of most were summed up by a Tunisian historian who I once asked to describe the scene in Tunis on the day the city was liberated. "Liberated?" he asked caustically. "What liberation? We went from German occupation back to French occupation."

Times haven't changed very much. U.S. forces saved Kuwait from Saddam Hussein's stranglehold, but the desert emirate votes against the United States at the United Nations about two-thirds of the time and has been among the most miserly Arab states when it comes to responding to American requests to support the Israeli-Palestinian peace process. Iraq today has a chance to build a functioning democracy thanks to the United States, but it's hard to find a pro-U.S. politician in Baghdad -- let alone a nice word for what America did on behalf of the Iraqi people. And it is easier to find a ham sandwich in Mecca than a "thank you" for the billions in development assistance that the United States has provided Egypt over the past three decades.

But gratitude is not the metric of a wise policy. Americans didn't make the greatest sacrifice 70 years ago to win the love of North Africans, and that shouldn't be the goal of our policy in the Middle East today. National interest -- not high poll numbers, warm embraces or polite thank yous -- drove policy then, as it should now. Again, that doesn't mean America should be indifferent to Arab goals and aspirations. To the contrary, should Arab countries and their leaders succeed, with American help, at developing well-functioning economies with representative, inclusive, transparent systems of government, this is, in the long run, a big win for the United States. We just shouldn't expect a thank-you note.

We came, we fought, we went: American troops raced across North Africa in World War II as fast as they could because their goal was to jump across the Strait of Sicily to begin the long march to Rome and, eventually, Berlin. They had little interest in transforming politics and society along the way and therefore set up no post-conflict military governments, organized no U.S.-style elections, and handpicked no local leaders to hand the reins of power. The Pottery Barn rule -- "you break it, you buy it" -- did not apply; the first store didn't open its doors until 1950, anyway.

Today, in contrast, the United States is deeply involved in the political life of countries across the region -- sometimes because of our direct presence, aid and support; sometimes because of the lure of our culture; sometimes only because the conspiratorial nature of local political thinking inflates the role we play into a phantom reality which takes on an absurd but very real life of its own.

To be sure, there are places where the United States should embrace this connection as an opportunity and other places where we can't run from the responsibility even if we wanted to do so. But if there is a lesson to be drawn from America's experience seven decades ago, it is that Washington should, at times, be willing to hew more closely to the Torch-era model of defining interests, achieving objectives, and then saying a bientot.

In the "Arab spring" states of Egypt and Tunisia, for example, new leaders have a sense of entitlement that America owes them billions of dollars in assistance as compensation for our past support of pro-U.S. autocrats. In turn, some in Washington appear to have a breathless passion to "get on the right side of history" by rushing to "educate" oppositionists-turned-politicians who spent a lifetime condemning America, and to provide them with substantial support without a clear understanding of the quid pro quos involved.

While the era may have passed when America could have the strategic equivalent of a one-night stand -- close intimacy followed by a swift, no-regrets farewell -- our standing in many countries is likely to improve the more we expect local governments to win us over, not vice versa. This means projecting less eagerness and enthusiasm and more restraint and coolness.

Learning from history has its limits: Torch and its aftermath do not provide all the answers for the many facets of America's current involvement in the broader Middle East. After all, the North African campaign was essentially a two-dimensional military affair -- Allies versus Axis -- whereas today's Middle East is characterized by a multiplicity of actors in a complex and highly politicized environment. But the lessons this forgotten chapter of American engagement in the Arab world does offer -- from the importance of defining strategy to the prioritization of competing interests to the most effective way to engage local actors -- continue to resonate. Indeed, preventing the next American deaths in Benghazi could depend on learning from the legacy of the 2,841 buried in Carthage.

Robert Satloff is executive director of The Washington Institute. ❖

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