Rethinking American Military Intervention in the Middle East

Michael Eisenstadt

Although the American people may be weary of the Middle East's "forever wars," the vital interests of the United States require that it remain militarily engaged there. The region's vast oil and gas reserves are economically essential to key trade partners, and its role in proliferation and as an exporter of instability, violent extremism, and terrorism can only be ignored at one's own peril. Since 9/11, the United States has learned the hard way that what happens in the Middle East doesn't stay in the Middle East.

The United States, however, has not dealt very effectively with the region's security challenges in the post-9/11 era—from combating transnational terrorist networks, defeating resilient insurgencies, or the challenges of state and nation building. Its interventions (and at times, disengagement) have contributed to the emergence of weak or failed states in Iraq, Libya, and Syria, while terrorism in and emanating from the region has increased dramatically since 9/11. American policymakers need to reassess how the U.S. government thinks, organizes, and acts militarily in the region so that it can better advance American interests in a part of the world that is still of vital importance to it.[1]

This means developing a better understanding of the region's culture and politics (or, as the military refers to it, the operational environment) and particularly the workings of a "non-Westphalian" state system—in which Middle Eastern countries often meddle in each other's affairs, and bandwagon (frequently with the help of outside powers) in order to prevent foes from consolidating military successes, and to preclude the emergence of a regional hegemon.[2]

These tendencies were exacerbated by the 2010-2011 Arab uprisings and the proliferation of weak and failed states that followed in its wake, which allowed terrorist groups like the Islamic State and al-Qaeda to establish themselves in ungoverned spaces, and enabled newly activist Arab states like Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Qatar (as well as non-Arab powers like Turkey, Iran, and Russia) to intervene in conflicts throughout the region. Conflicts have become more complex and interconnected, leading to the emergence of a regional "conflict system" spanning sub-Saharan Africa to South Asia, in which arms, foreign fighters, tactics and techniques, and combatants migrate from one conflict to another, often energizing and intensifying these brushfire wars and complicating efforts to resolve these conflicts.

For this reason, U.S. policymakers should abandon "solutionism"—the quixotic and quintessentially American quest to solve the Middle East's problems—and have modest expectations of what military interventions in the region can achieve, especially against resilient terrorist and insurgent networks. Given the momentum behind the violence, most of the Middle East's conflicts cannot be solved, only managed—at least for now.

This dynamic works both ways, however, and creates opportunities for the United States to roll back the achievements of its adversaries, should it desire to do so, as there will always be embattled parties looking for foreign patrons. But the region is not self-organizing, and in order for this to happen the United States will need to work with local partners against its adversaries, just as it did vis-à-vis the Soviet Union in the Middle East in the 1970s and in Afghanistan in the 1980s.

American Failures

Inadequate understanding of the operational environment has led to policy missteps and subpar performance by the United States in a number of areas. U.S. policies toward Damascus and Tehran have created a perception that the United States is aligned with Iran and tacitly

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supports the survival of Bashar al-Assad and his regime, providing a recruiting boon for IS and hindering the military campaign against it. U.S. efforts to deter adversaries and assure partners have been hindered by Washington's failure to maintain the credibility of prior commitments (e.g., the 2012 chemical weapons redline in Syria) and the perception that it is quick to abandon traditional partners (such as Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak) and to embrace adversaries (such as Iran and, more recently, Russia).

In its security force assistance, the United States has often ignored the cultural predilections and operational needs of its partners in trying to create militaries that are miniature replicas of the U.S. armed forces, while its Foreign Military Sales system has often been slow to respond to the urgent needs of its allies, causing them to go to other sources, such as Russia, for arms. And it has placed insufficient emphasis on information activities, which are the decisive line of operation for many of its enemies and rivals (e.g., IS, AQ, Iran, and Russia), and has done a poor job linking its information activities to its activities in the diplomatic and military arenas. As a result, it has not done enough to undermine the appeal of groups like the Islamic State, and the influence of strategic competitors such as Iran.

This assessment has a number of implications for the American "way of war," for how America employs the military instrument in the Middle East, and for its ongoing war against salafi-jihadist groups like IS and al-Qaeda.

A New Approach

First, policymakers need to break with their binary way of thinking about "war and peace," "victory and defeat," and "regular and irregular" conflicts. This shift is essential to success in a region where the boundaries between these terms are often blurred, and where conflicts are likely to yield ambiguous outcomes. In particular, the United States has to recognize that its struggle against salafi-jihadist groups is likely to be a long-term one. Many of the most committed adherents to this ideology are in their teens and twenties, and will be around for decades to come. And while the military defeat of the Islamic State's army and the dismantling of its so-called caliphate is a necessary condition for victory, it is not sufficient. Rather, the ideology of the global salafi-jihadist movement must be discredited. The military defeat of the organizations that act in the name of this ideology is a first step in that direction. But the United States needs to understand the process by which extremist ideologies gain traction and then eventually lose their appeal, so that it may better influence this process.

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Second, policymakers should stop seeking tactical and technological solutions (as embodied by the Defense Department's "third offset strategy"[3]) for politically driven conflicts—such as the struggle against salafi-jihadist groups—where technology, though critical, is less important than political and cultural savvy and sound geopolitical instincts. American tactical virtuosity and high-tech wizardry, and U.S. arms transfers and verbal assurances to partners and allies, cannot offset blunders whose impacts

are regional in scope and geopolitical in scale. The beginning of wisdom is to recognize this—and to avoid geopolitical missteps like America's bungled handling of the aftermath of its 2003 invasion of Iraq and the overthrow of Libya's President Qaddafi in 2011, its disengagement from Iraq between 2011-2014—which enabled the rise of IS, and its failure to support the non-salafist opposition in Syria, which contributed to the largest jihadist mobilization in modern times.

Third, the United States needs to adopt a "light footprint"[4] approach that is robust enough to maintain momentum against the Islamic State and al-Qaeda, to deter Iran and its proxies, to bring along regional partners, and to bolster and backstop diplomacy, yet does so without entailing an unsustainable investment of blood and treasure. Such an approach can succeed only if America acts more like its adversaries—working "by, with, and through" local partners and proxies to achieve incremental gains. This means formalizing the ad hoc adjustments to America's traditional way of war made since launching its counter-IS campaign in Iraq and Syria in 2014. And it means rethinking the U.S. approach to security force assistance and to supporting irregular forces engaged in unconventional warfare campaigns. The U.S. has notable past successes in both areas, and it needs to avoid repeating its failures in training the Iraqi Security Forces and the Syrian opposition.[5] An approach that relies on local partners and proxies will ensure that America's continued involvement in the region is sustainable, and that it retains the flexibility necessary to meet military contingencies elsewhere in the world.

Fourth, to the degree that America's main adversaries—Sunni salafi-jihadist groups such as IS and al-Qaeda on the one hand, and radical Shi'ite Iran on the other—both seek to undermine the Arab state system, it is in the U.S. interest to shore up the region's remaining strong states (Egypt, Israel, Jordan, Turkey, and the Gulf States), as well as non-state actors, such as the Syrian Kurdish PYD, that can hold ground, govern in a manner acceptable to the local population, and combat extremist groups like IS and al-Qaeda. And in areas that have experienced state failure, the United States should work against further fragmentation by pursuing sustainable political arrangements between local actors aligned with U.S. interests. The chaos now roiling the region, however, derives from fundamental changes in the balance of power between governments and opposition in the region's more deeply divided societies, that are driven by globalization and technological change. Here, Washington will need to accommodate itself to a new and enduring reality: the political fragmentation and decentralization prevalent in the region today will be a permanent "new normal" for large parts of the Middle East.[6]

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Fifth, information activities are of decisive importance for IS, al-Qaeda, and Iran, and are woven into all their activities. By contrast, the United States continues to under-resource its activities in the informational space. It has generally failed to effectively leverage the lethal effects of its military operations against IS to create decisive nonlethal effects in the psychological and informational domains. And it failed to effectively challenge Tehran's nuclear narrative during the negotiations that led up to the nuclear deal with Iran in 2015, and since. The United States must devote even greater resources and effort to framing the narrative regarding the struggle with salafi-jihadist groups like IS and al-Qaeda, as well as its strategic competition with Iran. And it must keep in mind that actions speak louder than words. The yawning gap between word and action in U.S. policy (exemplified by Washington's scant support for Syrian rebels while calling for President Assad's departure, vows to "destroy" IS with an under-resourced military campaign, and unfulfilled pledges to push back against Irani-

an regional activities after concluding a nuclear deal with Tehran), has undermined its standing among both friends and adversaries. The United States doesn't just have an image problem—it has a reality problem.[7]

Finally, while the American experience in Iraq and Afghanistan has soured many on the idea of transformational agendas, there is no avoiding them—though this time without costly occupations and state building efforts—if the U.S. is to succeed in the Middle East. The United States must not only transform its own strategic culture so that it can better deal with the military and governance challenges it faces in the region, but it must work with embattled regional partners to transform the zero-sum, winner-takes-all political culture that has spawned so many of the region's conflicts. Doing so is a prerequisite to enabling the emergence of a politics of compromise, inclusion, and moderation (if not democracy). Determining how to foster such a process of organic change—at a time that America's own political culture is changing in sometimes bewildering ways—may in fact be the most difficult long-term challenge the United States faces in the region. ■

Endnotes

[1] Linda Robinson et al., Improving Strategic Competence: Lessons from 13 Years of War (Santa Monica: RAND, 2014), http://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/research_reports/RR800/RR816/RAND_RR816.pdf.
[2] James Jeffrey and Michael Eisenstadt, U.S. Military Engagement in the Broader Middle East, (Washington, DC: Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 2016), http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/uploads/Documents/pubs/PolicyFocus143_JeffreyEisen-4.pdf.
[3] Bob Work, "The Third U.S. Offset Strategy and Its Implications for Partners and Allies," speech at the Willard Hotel, Washington, DC, January 28, 2015, http://www.defense.gov/News/Speeches/Speech-View/Article/606641/the-third-us-offset-strategy-and-its-implications-for-partners-and-allies.
[4] Maj. Fernando M. Lujan, Light Footprints: The Future of U.S. Military Intervention (Washington DC: Center for a New American Security, 2013), http://www.cnas.org/files/documents/publications/CNAS_LightFoot-print_VoicesFromTheField_Lujan.pdf.
[5] Jeffrey and Eisenstadt, U.S. Military Engagement in the Broader Middle East, 87-96.
[6] Seth Kaplan, "The Return of the 'Old Normal' in International Politics," unpublished manuscript, November 2016.
[7] Jeffrey and Eisenstadt, U.S. Military Engagement in the Broader Middle East, 97-103.