

THE NATIONAL INTEREST

Can American End Its War in the Greater Middle East?

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ISIS continues to hold vast swathes of territory in Iraq and Syria. A civil war rages in Yemen. Turks fight Kurds. A new UN-sponsored unity government struggles to assert its authority in Libya. A military dictatorship controls Egypt. Refugees fleeing chaos in Syria are flooding into Europe, and beyond. The Taliban is still in Afghanistan, and also terrorizing Pakistan. Violence between Israelis and Palestinians persists. And Iranian mullahs, empowered by the relaxation of international sanctions under last year's nuclear deal, thwart democracy at home and rattle ballistic missiles against their neighbors in the near abroad. This hardly exhaustive list describes the state of affairs in today's Greater Middle East.

In a sweeping new narrative, historian Andrew Bacevich surveys the history of U.S. involvement in the region and comes to a sobering conclusion: it isn't working.*

Actually, it's much worse than that. U.S. efforts have failed to bring peace and order to the region, and have often had the opposite effect. Meanwhile, they have undermined U.S. security here at home.

This, Bacevich explains in *Politico Magazine*, begs two rather obvious questions:

“First, why has the world's mightiest military achieved so little even while absorbing very considerable losses and inflicting even greater damage on the subjects of America's supposed beneficence? Second, why in the face of such unsatisfactory outcomes has the United States refused to chart a different course? In short, why can't we win? And since we haven't won, why can't we get out?”

For answers, he points to the “several assumptions that promote in Washington a deeply pernicious collective naiveté.”

The first is that U.S. officials and policymakers believe they “are able to discern the historical forces at work in the region.” This can be traced from the dominant narratives that Americans have spun from our experiences in the last two great wars of the twentieth century: World War II and the Cold War. In both instances, Americans chose to engage in “an epic competition between rival versions of modernity,” and our side, loosely liberalism, prevailed over the other side: fascism and communism, respectively. Ronald Reagan succinctly summarized his strategy for ending the Cold War: “We win. They lose.” And so we/they did. But Washington elites,

Bacevich explains, “are blind to the possibility that in the Greater Middle East substantially different historical forces just might be at work.”

The second key assumption “takes it for granted that as the sole global superpower the United States possesses not only the wisdom but also the wherewithal to control and direct such forces.” This hubris prevails despite the mountain of evidence showing that we do not, and cannot. Third, U.S. officials believe that U.S. military power is the “irreplaceable facilitator or catalyst” that will move “history toward its foreordained destination.” And, finally, the elites who construct and maintain the conventional wisdom on U.S. foreign policy believe that America’s good intentions will win broad acceptance. The liberators will eventually, and inevitably, Bacevich summarizes, “be granted the honors that [they] rightly deserve.”

American elites chose the Middle East as the place to test their premise, as spelled out in the draft Defense Planning Guidance of 1992, that U.S. military power would “shape” the international system in the post-Cold War era.

It was an odd choice. The Middle East was never *actually* that important to the United States, a point that others have made, and well, and the region has become even less important with the passage of time.

But the greater error was the foreign policy establishment’s exaggeration of the U.S. military’s capacity for altering the course of global politics. To be sure, the Middle East has proved a particularly tough nut to crack, and the presence of U.S. forces has engendered considerable resistance. It isn’t clear, however, that the DPG’s version of hegemonic stability theory would have fared that much better in other troubled regions. The military is a blunt instrument and the ability to project power often doesn’t translate into the ability to produce desired results.

If Washington persists with its grandiose plans for reshaping the region, and the world, we must assume that they have ignored Andrew Bacevich’s cogent analysis. But they can’t say they weren’t warned.

* Bacevich will be at the Cato Institute next week to discuss his new book, and he will be joined by CSIS’s Jon Alterman, and my Cato colleague Doug Bandow. More [details here](#).

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