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Why Military Intervention Will Never “Fix” the Middle East

Who Will Show the Moral Courage to End the US's Middle East Wars?

by Col. DOUGLAS MACGREGOR

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American military interventions tend to follow a familiar pattern. The path to intervention begins when Washington decides to support one side in an ongoing conflict. Regardless of its true nature, the side Washington chooses is elevated to sainthood while the side Washington decides to attack is demonized.

Soon, the usual suspects, Neocons and Liberal Interventionists who are only nominally Republicans or Democrats, trot out the old mantra, “It’s the 1930s and we can’t we can’t let another Hitler rise again.” In 1991 it was Saddam Hussein. In 1995, the villains were Radovan Karadžić and Ratko Mladić. In 1999, the principle villain was Slobodan Milošević. All were guilty of heinous crimes and deserved the worlds’ contempt, but none were radically different from most of their contemporaries governing peoples at the same time in the Balkans and the Middle East.

To the uniformed American public remote from the regions where their armed forces will operate, it did not matter. With the added boost from America's enthusiastic media, the usual suspects stampeded the nation into military action.

Today, things are a little different. After 13 years of 'mission accomplished' in Afghanistan and Iraq, and, after watching 123 Islamist Militias overrun Libya in the aftermath of the United States-led NATO bombing campaign, Americans are more circumspect. True, ISIS, the Sunni Islamists in pickup trucks ransacking towns across the wastelands of the Middle East, is barbarous and savage, but the support for all-out war to destroy ISIS involving tens of thousands of American Soldiers and Marines is tenuous. The solution: an "airpower only" answer to Washington's need to "do something."

Today, it's a re-run of the Kosovo Air Campaign across Mesopotamia. It's worth pausing to recall the events of the air campaign that lasted from 28 February 1998 until 11 June 1999.

In Kosovo American and NATO pilots found few if any good targets on the ground. Once Yugoslav (Serbian) tanks, artillery and troops dispersed across mountainous and forested terrain inside a region smaller than Wales, American Airpower had enormous trouble finding and attacking Serb forces. Old, but robust Serb air defenses skillfully integrated with commercial radars made effective air strikes launched from below 11,000 to 15,000 feet extremely dangerous, if not impossible.

Confronted with this situation, General Wes Clark expanded the air war beyond Kosovo into Serbia where the aircraft could easily identify and strike infrastructure. Initially, the resulting strikes in Serbia looked impressive on television and acted as a tonic for NATO's beleaguered leaders. The destruction of electrical power plants and bridges over the Danube ruined Serbia's economy, but it did little to influence events on the ground in Kosovo.

America's European allies grew impatient. Why, Europeans asked, had NATO's military Leaders not anticipated Serb military action to expel Kosovo's Muslim Albanian population? Why not refocus the air campaign on Serb forces in Kosovo? To make matters worse, small numbers of Serb and Albanian civilians died in air strikes meant for Serb troops or infrastructure. Predictably, public support for the air campaign in the United States and Europe weakened.

Undeterred, General Clark pressed for the commitment of U.S. and European ground forces. Clark believed the air campaign was the equivalent of "Rolling Thunder," the 1965 air campaign that led to the commitment of U.S. Ground Forces to Vietnam. It was not to be.

After weeks of negotiations, Ambassador Strobe Talbot succeeded in persuading Moscow to abandon Belgrade. Moscow deserted Belgrade because Moscow needed American and European support to cope with Russia's shattered economy and a relentless Muslim rebellion in Chechnya.

Without Russian material support in terms of food and fuel, Milošević had no choice but to capitulate. Without food and fuel, hundreds of thousands of Serbs would die in the fierce Balkan

winter. Serbian forces withdrew in good order from Kosovo. Pushing the Serbs out of Kosovo cost roughly \$4.5 billion. Air strikes inflicted \$9 billion of damage on little Serbia. Damage to the economies of the States in the Danube River Valley, to Italy and Greece ran into the billions of dollars too.

President Clinton was understandably relieved. He'd escaped from the Balkan disaster just in time.

Unfortunately for Mr. Obama, the Middle East is not tiny Kosovo. There is no easy retreat from the strident declarations made at the outset of his generals' hasty, ill-conceived policy of intervention from the air. Once again, there are few, if any, lucrative target sets for American Airpower. Worse, the Middle East is in the grip of societal collapse and radicalization.

From the Mediterranean to the Indian Ocean, the old Cold War military alliances are crumbling and many of the Sunni Arab ruling elites that supported them fear their own populations. Millions of Sunni Muslim Arabs admire ISIS. They do so because they are struggling with dysfunctional governments mired in corruption and they to fear the encroaching power and influence of Shiite Iran in Damascus, Baghdad, and the Persian Gulf Emirates.

More significantly, Turkish President Tayyip Erdogan is leading Turkey's population of 77 million on an Ottoman Revival intertwined with the reinvigoration of Turkey's centuries' old Islamic identity. Since taking office, Erdogan has rejected every American diplomatic and military initiative in the region. Frustrated with the failure of the Muslim Brotherhood to secure power in Egypt, Erdogan has no interest in obstructing ISIS's attacks on his regional opponents, apostate Shiites, Christians, Jews and, most of all, Kurds.

Erdogan and his Sunni Islamist supporters in the region are furious with Washington's support for the Kurdish independence and Iran's client Shiite State Baghdad. American air strikes are rescuing Ankara's enemies from destruction at the hands of ISIS. Whatever else ISIS may be, in Erdogan's mind, they are fellow Sunni Islamists and many of its fighters are Turks from the Caucasus and Central Asia, as well as Anatolia. Under these circumstances no one in Washington should be surprised that the Turkish Army, the largest in NATO, obedient to Erdogan's orders recently attacked Kurds, but not ISIS fighters.

More time, new tactics, more money, more troops and better strategic "partners" will not change these regional realities. The logical choice for President Obama is to tell the American people the truth: America's military interventions in the Middle East and Southwest Asia are festering sores, bottomless pits for American blood and treasure. Americans can secure their own borders, enforce the rule of law and build economic prosperity at home, but Americans in uniform cannot and will not "fix" the Middle East.

Of course, suspending military operations that are both ineffective and counterproductive takes both understanding and moral courage. In Washington DC, moral courage is always in short supply. British Prime Minister, Sir Benjamin Disraeli made the same point over a hundred years ago: "You will find as you grow older," Disraeli said to a new member of the House of Commons, "that courage is the rarest of all qualities to be found in public life."

