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## America's war for the Greater Middle East

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America's War for the Greater Middle East is a remarkable book. Andrew J Bacevich, a military historian and an American patriot who served in the United States military, and who lost his son in the Iraq war, is a no-nonsense no-warmonger.

Sober and comprehensive, Bacevich's balance sheet of US wars in the Muslim world is a testimony to Washington's military failures in the Greater Middle East.

Throughout the book he employs an analytical razor to dissect the doctrines and dogmas behind direct US military intervention in the Middle East, which he dates back not to Franklin Roosevelt or Dwight Eisenhower, but rather to Jimmy Carter.

The Carter doctrine can be summarised by the following declaration: "Any attempt by any outside force to gain control of the Persian Gulf region will be regarded as an assault on the vital interests of the United States of America, and such an assault will be repelled by any means necessary, including military force."

Andrew cuts Carter some slack, but shows how his doctrine paved the way for future interventions. He scrutinises each and every one of the dozen US military campaigns in the

Greater Middle East and Muslim world, but connects them all into one strategic mindset spanning over four decades.

And then critiques the rationale behind the use of force since 1980 through a dispassionate evaluation of US military strategies from the first to the fourth Gulf wars and from Bosnia to Afghanistan through Lebanon, Syria, Somalia, Lebanon, and Yemen and others.

### **Delusional leadership, oblivious public**

For Bacevich, US wars in the Middle East are driven not only by oil and the military industrial complex. He sees a collective illusion or naivete leading to more of the same blunders and mistakes.

And he shows how despite the proven failures, US leaders and strategists have continued to use the same Washington playbook.

Among others, ignoring the simple lesson that starting wars is nothing like ending them, and what Washington portrayed as military victories or "missions accomplished" have consistently mutated into different sorts of prolonged conflicts.

The victory against the Soviets in Afghanistan later revealed itself as a major loss. For Washington, Soviet withdrawal meant that the US won, but that was a short-sighted reaction. The first Afghan war paved the way towards a second one in 2001.

Bacevich reckons supporting Iraq in the 1980s first Gulf war (the Iran-Iraq War) was also short-sighted, even though the US declared it a victory when Iran basically folded.

Iranian hostility continued to brew while Saddam Hussein invaded Kuwait, leading to greater US involvement in Iraq - to undo the Vietnam syndrome.

The 1991 war might have been a profitable war - Colin Powell later claimed America made money out of it - but it only paved the way for the 2003 war, which in turn paved the way for yet another more recent intervention against the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant group (ISIL, also known as ISIS).

And so on and so forth.

Bacevich doesn't spare any of the politicians or generals involved in making the case for war. From Carter to Barack Obama through Ronald Reagan, Clinton and both the George Bushes, and from the performances of former generals Wesley Clark to David Petraeus and Stanley McChrystal and numerous others, Bacevich shows how the US political and military leadership has consistently overpromised and under-delivered.

And with the mainstream media utterly complicit in selling the war enterprise, Bacevich doesn't hesitate to point the finger at an oblivious American public that's too preoccupied with trivia as their country is stuck in the quagmire of the Greater Middle East.

In a passage of refreshing candour, Bacevich argues that the US might support freedom, democracy and prosperity in the Middle East, but only as long as it gets the lion's share of it - everything else is an afterthought.

### **Wrong wars, wrong lessons**

As a military historian, Bacevich argues in his opening chapter that the Carter doctrine paved the way for decades of US military intervention in the Greater Middle East, allowing subsequent administrations to expand it to include many countries in the region.

Since then American leaders have ignored the lessons of history and the experiences of other imperial powers. As a secular enterprise, Bacevich reckons, the US military has also ignored religion and its complex influence in the region.

Indeed, most of the lessons that should have been learned in the pre-9/11 Middle East went unheeded after the September attacks. The US doubled down and went on to use more military force to foster the illusion of shaping the Greater Middle East region.

Instead of policy dictating the military's role, the US' military enterprise began to dictate policy and diplomacy in the Middle East.

Its military missions went on to creep, as the US became incapable of extracting itself from the region. In the process, it failed miserably to fulfil any of its objectives either in Iraq, the Gulf or against al-Qaeda.

Even the most sensible of the US presidents over the past four decades, Obama, couldn't help repeat more of the same mistakes in Afghanistan, Libya and Iraq.

Like his predecessors, he resorted to a rhetoric that is disconnected from reality, claiming the US' longest war ended responsibly in Afghanistan - when it didn't - and portending to leave behind a democratic and stable Iraq - when it's anything but that.

### **Can the US change?**

Bacevich laments the lack of creative non-military thinking in Washington and the absence of a peace-oriented political party that advocates fewer military answers to challenges in the US and across the world.

And he emphasises the high stakes for the military industrial complex in prolonged military campaigns, against the backdrop of an oblivious public.

For change to happen, Americans must show more interest in their foreign policy and military interventions in the Middle East and beyond.

Most Arabs and many Muslims have little or no say when dictators and extremists resort to war and violence to satisfy their ambitions and greed.

But Americans have a choice and do have a say, and therefore must take responsibility for their leaders' choices and blunders.

Does this mean President Obama was right not to intervene in Syria? Especially when the majority of Americans opposed direct military intervention after Iraq and Afghanistan?

Bacevitch certainly agrees. And so do I. But it's not as simple as that - not after the death of hundreds of thousands of Syrians.

In the absence of direct military intervention, the US, the de facto regional policeman, should have done more than witness as genocide was carried out under their watch. And it could have done more to deter Assad, protect civilians and reach a diplomatic solution.

Leaving it to Iran, Israel and Saudi Arabia to take care of business - such as military interventions - is hardly the solution for an exploding region.

Americans need to pay attention not only when Americans die, but also when countless Arabs and Muslims pay the price of the US' follies in the region.