

## U.S. Directly Responsible for Millions of Civilian Deaths, numerous Failed States and Mid-East Chaos

by Danny Sjursen via dan - Tomdispatch *Thursday, Feb 23 2017, 12:07am*  
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### The Misuse of American Military Power and Middle Eastern Chaos

The United States has already lost its war for the Middle East, which couldn't be clearer to me after having been involved in combat and soldiering in both Iraq and Afghanistan. However, Washington continues with its reality aversion, the hard facts continue to be ignored in favor of mythologizing.

Bush's neo-imperial triumphalism failed. Obama's [quiet shift](#) to drones, Special Forces, and clandestine executive actions did not turn the tide either. And now, for all President Trump's bluster, boasting, and threats, rest assured that he'll barely move the needle and worse, Trump may inflame and exacerbate an already disastrous situation... but why even go there?

At this point, it's at least reasonable to look back and ask yet again: Why the failure? Explanations abound, of course. Perhaps Americans were simply never tough enough and still need to take off the kid gloves. Maybe there just weren't ever enough troops. (Bring back the draft!) Maybe all those [hundreds of thousands](#) of (for profit) bombs and missiles just came up short [*but not for the weapons manufacturers*]. So how about lots more of them, maybe even a [nuke](#)?

Lead from the front, lead from behind, [surge](#) yet again... The list goes on -- and on and on.

And by now all of it, including Donald Trump's recent tough talk, represents such a familiar tune. But what if the problem is far deeper and more fundamental than is presently perceived?

Here our nation stands, 15-plus years after 9/11, engaged militarily in [half a dozen](#) countries across the Greater Middle East, with no end in sight. Perhaps a more critical, factual reading of our recent past would illuminate the futility of America's tragic, ongoing project to somehow "destroy" terrorism in the Muslim world.

The standard triumphalist version of the last 100 or so years of our history might go something like this: in the twentieth century, the United States repeatedly intervened, just in the nick of time, to save the feeble Old World from militarism, fascism, and then, in the Cold War, communism. It did indeed save the day in three global wars and might have lived happily ever after as the world's "[sole superpower](#)" if not for the sudden emergence of a new menace. Seemingly out of nowhere, "[Islamofascists](#)" shattered American complacency with a sneak attack reminiscent of Pearl Harbor. Collectively the people asked: Why do they hate us? Of course, there was no time to really reflect, so the government simply got to work, taking the fight to our new "[medieval](#)" enemies on their own turf. It's admittedly been a long, hard slog, but what choice did our leaders have, better to fight them in Baghdad than Brooklyn.

However, what if this foundational narrative is not just flawed but delusional? Alternative views/accounts lead to wholly divergent conclusions and are more likely to inform prudent policy in the Middle East.

Let's reconsider just two key years for the United States in that region: 1979 and 2003. America's leadership learned all the wrong "lessons" from those pivotal moments and has militarily intervened ever since on the basis of some perverse view of real events and neutralizing perceived problems, with the result, which is clear that US intervention has been a disastrous failure, plain to see.

A more honest narrative of those moments would lead to a far more modest, minimalist approach to a messy and tragic region. The problem is that there seems to be something inherently un-American about entertaining such thoughts.

## 1979 Revisited

Through the first half of the Cold War, the Middle East remained a sideshow. In 1979, however, all that changed radically. First, rising protests against the brutal police state of the American-backed Shah of Iran led to regime collapse, the return of dissident ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, and the declaration of an Islamic Republic. Then Iranian students stormed the U.S. embassy in Tehran, holding 52 hostages for more than 400 days. Of course, by then few Americans remembered the CIA-instigated [coup](#) of 1953 that had toppled a democratically elected Iranian prime minister to preserve Western corporate [oil interests](#) in that country, which started both nations on this disastrous path (though Iranians clearly hadn't forgotten). The shock and duration of the hostage crisis undoubtedly ensured that Jimmy Carter would be a [one-term](#) president and -- and to make matters worse -- Soviet troops intervened in Afghanistan to shore up a communist government there. It was quite a year.

The alarmist conventional narrative of these events went like this: the radical mullahs running Iran were irrational zealots with an inexplicable loathing for the American way of life. As if, in a preview of 9/11, hearing those chants against "the Great Satan," Americans would promptly begin asking with true puzzlement, why do they hate us? The hostage crisis challenged world peace. Carter had to do something. Worse yet, the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan represented blatant conquest and spotlighted the possibility of Red Army hordes pushing through to Iran en route to the Persian Gulf's vast oil reserves. It might prove the opening act of the long awaited Soviet scheme for world domination or a possible path to World War III.

Misinformed by such a tale that they repeatedly told themselves, Washington officials then made terrible choices in the Middle East. Let's start with Iran. They mistook a nationalist revolution and subsequent civil war within Islam for a singular attack on the U.S.A. With little consideration of genuine Iranian gripes about the [brutal](#) U.S.-backed dynasty of the Shah or the slightest appreciation for the complexity of that country's internal dynamics; they subsequently created a simple-minded but convenient narrative in which the Iranians posed an existential threat to this country. Little has changed in almost four decades.

Then, though few Americans could locate Afghanistan on a map, most officials accepted that it was indeed a country of vital strategic interest. Of course, with the opening of their archives, it's clear enough now that the Soviets [never sought](#) the worldwide empire we imagined, especially not by 1979. The Soviet leadership was, in fact, divided over the Afghan affair and intervened in Kabul in a spirit more defensive than aggressive. Their desire or even ability to drive towards the Persian Gulf was, at best, a fanciful American notion.

Nonetheless, the Iranian revolution and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan were combined into a tale of horror that would lead to the permanent militarization of U.S. policy in the Middle East. Remembered today as a dove-in-chief, in his 1980 State of the Union [address](#) President Carter announced a decidedly hawkish new doctrine that would come to bear his name. From then on, he said, the U.S. would consider any threat to Persian Gulf oil supplies a direct threat to this country

and American troops would, if necessary, unilaterally intervene to secure the region.

The results will seem painfully familiar today: almost immediately, Washington policymakers began to seek military solutions to virtually every problem in the Middle East. Within a year, the administration of President Ronald Reagan would, for instance, support Iraqi autocrat Saddam Hussein's ruthless invasion of Iran, ignoring his more vicious antics and his proclivity for gassing his own people.

Soon after, in 1983, the military created the United States Central Command (headquarters: Tampa, Florida) with specific responsibility for the Greater Middle East. Its early [war plans demonstrated](#) just how wildly out of touch with reality American planners already were by then. Operational [blueprints](#), for instance, focused on defeating Soviet armies in Iran before they could reach the Persian Gulf. Planners imagined U.S. Army divisions crossing Iran, itself in the midst of a major war with Iraq, to face off against a Soviet armored juggernaut (just like the one that was always expected to burst through Europe's Fulda Gap). That such an assault was never coming, or that the fiercely proud Iranians might object to the militaries of either superpower crossing their territories, figured little in such early plans that were monuments to American arrogance and naïveté.

From there, it was but a few short steps to the permanent "defensive" basing of the Navy's Fifth Fleet in Bahrain or later the stationing of U.S. troops near the holy cities of Mecca and Medina to protect Saudi Arabia from Iraqi attack. Few asked how such forces in the heart of the Middle East would play on the Arab street or corroborate Islamist [narratives](#) of "crusader" imperialism.

Worse yet, in those same years the CIA armed and financed a grab bag of Afghan insurgent groups, most of them extreme Islamists. Eager to turn Afghanistan into a Soviet "Vietnam," no one in Washington bothered to ask whether such guerrilla outfits conformed to our purported principles or what the rebels would do if they won. Of course, the victorious guerrillas contained foreign fighters and various Arab supporters, including one Osama bin Laden. Eventually, the excesses of the well-armed but morally bankrupt insurgents and warlords in Afghanistan triggered the formation and ascension of the Taliban there, and from one of those guerrilla outfits came a new organization that called itself al-Qaeda. The rest, as they say, is history, and thanks to Chalmers Johnson's appropriation of a classic CIA term of spy craft, we now know it as [blowback](#).

That was a major turning point for the U.S. military. Before 1979, few of its troops had served in the region. In the ensuing decades, America bombed, invaded, raided, sent its drones to kill in, or attacked Iran, Lebanon, Libya, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Iraq, Somalia, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Yemen, Iraq again (and again), Somalia (again and again), Libya again, Iraq once more, and now Syria as well. Before 1979, few -- if any -- American military personnel died in the Greater Middle East. Few have [died](#) anywhere else since.

### 2003 and After: Fantasies and Reality

Who wouldn't agree that the 2003 invasion of Iraq signified a major turning point both in the history of the Greater Middle East and in our own? Nonetheless, its legacy remains highly contested. The standard narrative goes like this: as the sole remaining superpower on the planet after the implosion of the Soviet Union in 1991, our invincible military organized a swift and convincing defeat of Saddam Hussein's Iraq in the first Gulf War. After 9/11, that same military launched an inventive, swift, and triumphant campaign in Afghanistan. Osama bin Laden escaped, of course, but his al-Qaeda network was shattered and the Taliban all but [destroyed](#).

Naturally, the threat of Islamic terror was never limited to the Hindu Kush, so Washington "had" to

take its fight against terror global. Admittedly, the subsequent conquest of Iraq didn't exactly turn out as planned and perhaps the Arabs weren't quite ready for American-style democracy anyway. Still, the U.S. was committed, had shed blood, and had to stay the course, rather than cede momentum to the terrorists. Anything less would have dishonored the venerated dead. Luckily, President George W. Bush found an enlightened new commander, General David Petraeus, who, with his famed "surge," [snatched](#) victory, or at least stability, from the jaws of defeat in Iraq. He had the insurgency all but whipped. Then, just a few years later, "[spineless](#)" Barack Obama [prematurely](#) pulled American forces out of that country, an act of weakness that led directly to the rise of ISIS and the current nightmare in the region. Only a strong, assertive successor to Obama could right such gross errors.

It's a riveting tale, of course, even if it is misguided in nearly every way imaginable. At each turn, Washington learned the wrong lessons and drew perilous conclusions. At least the first Gulf War -- to George H.W. Bush's credit -- involved a large [multinational coalition](#) and checked actual Iraqi aggression. Instead of cheering Bush the Elder's limited, prudent strategy, surging neoconservatives [demanded](#) to know why he had stopped short of taking the Iraqi capital, Baghdad. In these years (and for this we can certainly thank Bush, among others), Americans -- Republicans and Democrats alike -- became [enamored](#) with military force and came to believe that it could solve just about any problem in that region, if not the world.

This would prove a grotesque misunderstanding of what had happened. The Gulf War had been an anomaly. Triumphalist conclusions about it rested on the shakiest of foundations. Only if an enemy fought exactly as the U.S. military preferred it to do, as indeed Saddam's forces did in 1991 -- conventionally, in open desert, with outdated Soviet equipment -- could the U.S. expect such success. Americans drew another conclusion entirely: that their military was [unstoppable](#).

The same faulty assumptions flowed from Afghanistan in 2001. Information technology, Special Forces, CIA dollars (to Afghan warlords), and smart bombs triggered victory with few conventional foot soldiers needed. It seemed a forever formula and influenced both the hasty decision to invade Iraq, and the irresponsibly [undersized force](#) structure deployed (not to speak of the complete lack of serious preparation for actually occupying that country). So powerful was the optimism and jingoism of invasion, proponents painted skeptics as [unpatriotic](#) turncoats.

Then things turned ugly fast. This time around, Saddam's army simply melted away, state institutions broke down, looting was rampant, and the three major communities of Iraq -- Sunni, Shia, and Kurd -- began to battle for power. The invaders never received the jubilant welcome [predicted](#) for them by Bush administration officials and supportive neocons. What began as a Sunni-based insurgency to regain power morphed into a nationalist rebellion and then into an Islamist struggle against Westerners.

Nearly a century earlier, Britain had formed Iraq from three separate Ottoman imperial provinces -- Baghdad, Basra, and Mosul. The 2003 invasion blew up that synthetic state, held together first by British overlords and then by Saddam's brutal dictatorship. American policymakers seemed genuinely [surprised](#) by all this.

Those in Washington never adequately understood the essential conundrum of forced regime change in Iraq. "Democracy" there would inevitably result in Shia majority dominance of an artificial state. Empowering the Shia drove the Sunni minority -- long accustomed to power -- into the embrace of armed, motivated Islamists. When societies fracture as Iraq's did, often enough the worst among us rise to the occasion. As the poet William Butler Yeats so famously put it, "Things fall apart; the center cannot hold; Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world, the blood-dimmed tide is loosed... The

best lack all conviction, while the worst are full of passionate intensity.”

Furthermore, the invasion [played](#) directly into Osama bin Laden’s hands, fueling his narrative of an American “war on Islam.” In the process, the U.S. also destabilized Iraq’s neighbors and the region, spreading extremists to Syria and elsewhere.

That David Petraeus’s surge “worked” is perhaps the [greatest myth](#) of all. It was true that the steps he took resulted in a decrease in violence after 2007, largely because he paid off the Sunni tribes, not because of the modest U.S. troop increase ordered from Washington. By then, the Shia had already won the sectarian civil war for Baghdad, [intensifying](#) Sunni-Shia residential segregation there and so temporarily lessening the capacity for carnage.

That post-surge “calm” was, however, no more than a tactical pause in an ongoing regional sectarian war. No fundamental problems had been resolved in post-Saddam Iraq, including the nearly impossible task of integrating Sunni and Kurdish minorities into a coherent national whole. Instead, Washington had left a highly [sectarian](#) Shia strongman, Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki, in control of the government and internal security forces, while al-Qaeda in Iraq, or AQI [ISIS] (nonexistent prior to the invasion), never would be eradicated. Its leadership, [further radicalized](#) in U.S. Army prisons, bided its time, waiting for an opportunity to win back Sunni fealty.

Luckily for AQI, as soon as the U.S. military was pulled out of the country, Maliki promptly cracked down hard on peaceful Sunni protests. He even had his Sunni vice president [sentenced to death](#) in absentia under the most questionable of circumstances. Maliki’s ineptitude would prove an AQI godsend.

Islamists, including AQI, also [took advantage](#) of events in Syria. Autocrat Bashar al-Assad’s brutal repression of his own protesting Sunni majority gave them just the opening they needed. Of course, the revolt there might never have occurred had not the invasion of Iraq [destabilized](#) the entire region. In 2014, the former AQI leaders, having absorbed some of Saddam’s cashiered officers into their new forces, triumphantly [took a series of Iraqi cities](#), including Mosul, sending the Iraqi army fleeing. They then declared a caliphate in Iraq and Syria. Many Iraqi Sunnis naturally turned to the newly established “Islamic State” (ISIS) for protection.

Mission (Un)Accomplished!

It’s hardly controversial these days to point out that the 2003 invasion (aka Operation Iraqi Freedom), far from bringing freedom to that country, sowed chaos. Toppling Saddam’s brutal regime tore down the edifice of a regional system that had stood for nearly a century. However inadvertently, the U.S. military lit the fire that burned down the old order.

As it turned out, no matter the efforts of the globe’s greatest military, no easy foreign solution existed when it came to Iraq. It rarely does. Unfortunately, few in Washington were willing to accept such realities. Think of that as the twenty-first-century American Achilles’ heel: unwarranted optimism about the efficacy of U.S. power. Policy in these years might best be summarized as: “we” have to do something, and military force is the best -- perhaps the only -- feasible option.

Has it worked? Is anybody, including Americans, safer? Few in power even bother to ask such questions. But the data is there. The Department of State counted just [348 terrorist attacks](#) worldwide in 2001 compared with [11,774 attacks in 2015](#). That’s right: at best, America’s 15-year “war on terror” failed to significantly reduce international terrorism; at worst, its actions helped make matters 30 times worse.



Recall the Hippocratic oath: "First do no harm." And remember Osama bin Laden's [stated goal](#) on 9/11: to draw conventional American forces into attritional campaigns in the heart of the Middle East. [Mission accomplished!](#)

In today's world of "[alternative facts](#)," it's proven remarkably easy to ignore such empirical data and so avoid thorny questions. Recent events and contemporary political discourse even suggest that the country's political elites now inhabit a [post-factual](#) environment; in terms of the Greater Middle East, this has been true for years.

It couldn't be more obvious that Washington's officialdom regularly and repeatedly drew erroneous lessons from the recent past and ignored a hard truth staring them in the face: U.S. military action in the Middle East has solved nothing. Only the government cannot seem to accept this. Meanwhile, an American fixation on one unsuitable term -- "[isolationism](#)" -- masks a more apt description of American dogma in this period of hyper-interventionism.

As for military leaders, they struggle to admit failure when they -- and their troops -- have sacrificed so much sweat and blood in the region. Senior officers display the soldier's tendency to [confuse performance with effectiveness](#), staying busy with being successful. Prudent strategy requires differentiating between doing a lot and doing the right things. As Einstein reputedly opined, "Insanity is doing the same thing over and over again and expecting a different result."

A realistic look at America's recent past in the Greater Middle East and a humbler perspective on its global role suggest two unsatisfying but vital conclusions. First, false lessons and misbegotten collective assumptions contributed to and created much of today's regional mess. As a result, it's long past time to reassess recent history and challenge long-held suppositions. Second, policymakers badly overestimated the efficacy of American power, especially via the military, to shape foreign peoples and cultures to their desires. In all of this, the agency of locals and the inherent contingency of events were conveniently swept aside.

So what now? It should be obvious (but probably isn't in Washington) that it's well past time for the U.S. to bring its incessant urge to respond militarily to the crisis of the moment under some kind of control. Policymakers should accept realistic limitations on their ability to shape the world to America's desired image.

Consider the last few decades in Iraq and Syria. In the 1990s, Washington employed economic sanctions against Saddam Hussein and his regime. The result: tragedy to the tune of [half a million dead children](#). Then it tried invasion and democracy promotion. The result: tragedy -- including [4,500-plus](#) dead American soldiers, a few [trillion dollars](#) down the drain, <https://www.iraqbodycount.org/> more than 200,000 dead Iraqis, and [millions more displaced](#) in their own country or in flight as refugees.

In response, in Syria the U.S. tried only limited intervention. Result: tragedy -- [upwards of 300,000 dead](#) and close to [seven million](#) more turned into refugees.

So will [tough talk](#) and escalated military action finally work this time around as the Trump administration faces off against ISIS? Consider what happens even if the U.S. achieves a significant rollback of ISIS. Even if, in conjunction with allied Kurdish or Syrian rebel forces, ISIS's "capital," Raqqa, is taken and the so-called caliphate destroyed, the ideology isn't going away. Many of its fighters are likely to transition back to an insurgency and there will be no end to international terror in ISIS's name. In the meantime, none of this will have solved the underlying problems of artificial states now at the edge of collapse or beyond, divided ethno-religious groups, and anti-Western

nationalist and religious sentiments. All of it begs the question: What if Americans are incapable of helping (at least in a military sense)?

A real course correction is undoubtedly impossible without at least a willingness to reconsider and reframe our recent historical experiences. If the 2016 election is any indication, however, a Trump administration with the present line-up of national security chiefs (who [fought](#) in these very wars) won't meaningfully alter either the outlook or the policies that led us to this moment. Candidate Trump offered a hollow promise -- to "Make America Great Again" -- conjuring up a mythical era that never was. Meanwhile, Hillary Clinton offered only remarkably dated and stale rhetoric about America as the "[indispensable nation](#)."

In the new Trump era, neither major party seems capable of escaping a shared commitment to the legends rather than the facts of America's recent past in the Greater Middle East. Both sides remain eerily confident that the answers to contemporary foreign policy woes lie in a mythical version of that past, whether Trump's imaginary 1950s paradise or Clinton's fleeting mid-1990s "unipolar moment."

Both ages are long gone, if they ever really existed at all. Needed is some fresh thinking about our militarized version of foreign policy and just maybe an urge, after all these years, to do so much less. Patriotic fables certainly feel good, but they achieve little. My advice: dare to be discomfited.

*[Grammatically edited]*

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*[This piece is extremely US-centric, which is typical -- however, for the free world a far more expedient solution presents itself, and that is to view the self-attributed "indispensable nation" as the most dispensable, pariah nation on the planet.]*

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Jungle Drum Prose/Poetry. <http://jungledrum.lingama.net/news/story-2546.html>