

America's War for the Greater Middle East: A Military History

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As a world power, the US has fought many wars in its history. It has interests all over the world, and these have shaped its policies, occasionally leading to wars and interventions. The Middle East has been in focus, at least since the Second World War. The cold war and its end kept the oil rich, volatile region in focus of US leadership. *Americas War for the Greater Middle East* is an account of America's role and involvement in and around the Middle East. Bacevich has been an officer in US military, and a professor of history and IR at Boston University. He has a PhD in diplomatic history from Princeton University.

He starts off saying, "...America's War for the Greater Middle East was a war to preserve the American way of life..." (p.3). But, there are other more complicated reasons for this policy, political, military as well as strategic. Bacevich builds his case from the 60s and 70s, with the observation, "the first round of proposals to militarize US policy in the Middle East found little favor in the Pentagon." (p.8) 'Instability' in the region made it a 'strategic imperative' to devise policies to cope with the region.

The Iranian Revolution was one signal prompting a major shift. In the 1980s, the Reagan administration was willing to engage 'in a variety of military and paramilitary operations on several fronts across the Greater Middle East. (p.50) The Operation Cyclone reflected an irony in Americas' War for the Greater Middle East: "...the unwitting tendency, while intently focusing on solving one problem, to exacerbate a second and plant the seeds of a third..." (p.52) Thus, the Reagan

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administration's support for the 'noble savages' (*mujahedin*), in the insurgency (*jihad*) in Afghanistan.

Another involvement was in Lebanon, where Reagan dispatched US Marines, where radical Islamists "inflicted the largest tactical defeat on the US military since the Koran war." (p.62) Reagan did not stop there; invoking 'freedom of navigation,' US airpower challenged Libya (and its forces) over the Gulf of Sidra in a major international incident.

Interestingly, under a directive 'Combating Terrorism', Reagan asked the Pentagon to develop a military strategy "in support of an active, preventive program to combat state-sponsored terrorism." (p.80)

Iraq's Saddam Hussein became a pain and a threat for the US in the 90s, but for Bacevich, coming to Saddam's aid—indeed, to his rescue— "formed part of Americas War for the Greater Middle East." (p.87)

Bacevich provides details of the US policy that included opening up a "secret channel to provide Baghdad with sensitive intelligence, including satellite imagery" against Iran. (p.93) But, the Iran-Contra affair made it a perilous game.

Since Bacevich is writing about military history, reference to Vietnam is in order; he refers to Desert Storm as 'Vietnam-done-right.' He poignantly quotes Time in terming Desert Storm, "the end of the old American depression called the Vietnam syndrome..." (128), and gives the verdict: "Operation Desert Storm accomplished next to nothing." (p.134)

There is discussion of a 'humanitarian intervention', Operation Provide Relief/Restore Hope, and intervention in the Balkans. One is not sure, if the two cases fit into the framework of "War for the Greater Middle East," except for pointing to "a serious failure of political will and military judgment." (p.159)

US war against al-Qaeda is another case in Bacevich narrative. Starting in December 1992, with al-Qaeda attempt to kill Americans in Yemen. He rightly observes that from the vantage point of 9/11 attacks, these were "unheeded warnings of what lay ahead." (p.204) US impulsive and foolish response to "bin Laden's declaration of war with a de facto declaration of its own..." led to a "phony war," (p.210) climaxing in attacks of September 11.

Bush administrations' invasion of Iraq "situates the Third Gulf War of 2003-2011 within the larger context of Americas War for the Greater Middle East." (239) It became the task of Bush and Obama administrations to manage the two conflict zones, and to withdraw from both. While, this was done, in both cases, the major problem remains far from settled.

Bacevich account reads well as military history, with linkages from the past, from the World War II as well as the Civil War. But, the framework of ‘War for the Greater Middle East’ appears tenuous to be able to explain almost all of Americas wars since the 60s. And, what exactly does the phrase connote? American presence or hegemony in the greater Middle East, or its “wars”?

This voluminous work chronicles America’s recent military history, and engagements. It answers questions like, what led to US entry into wars (and conflict). How it was explained? And, importantly, the political and military decision-making dynamics. The account also offers insights into the traits of military leaders; for instance, “to an unhealthy extent, Schwarzkopf also shared McArthur’s penchant for theatrics. As with Patton, maintaining his emotional balance required a constant struggle. Like Eisenhower, Schwarzkopf had a volcanic temper, which (unlike IKE) he made little effort to keep in check.” (p.120)

The conclusion appears as a truism, “Perpetuating the War for the Greater Middle East is not enhancing American freedom, abundance and security. If anything, it is having the opposite effect.” (p.370) That may be true in a way, but, how is the US to react to the threats to its freedom, abundance, and security. As a book of military history, and International Relations/Foreign Policy, Becevich’s work has a lot to offer to students of US military history and foreign relations.

Reference

Bacevich, Andrew J. *America’s War for the Greater Middle East: A Military History*. New York: Random House, 2016.