

The Middle East

Which GPS are we using—the geo political savvy or the great policy shift?

by Hamid Lellou

On a cold night in February 1943, people from around the country gathered around the radio, with map of the world spread out on their table, waiting for President Franklin D. Roosevelt's weekly fireside chat.

This war is a new kind of war, he stated. 'It is different from all other wars of the past, not only in its methods and weapons but also in its geography. That is the reason why I have asked you to take out and spread before you a map of the whole earth, and to follow with me the references which I shall make to the world-encircling battle lines of this war.'¹

Today too, we begin a new war with the Islamic State (IS). In this "bootless war," it is even more important for us to understand the geography of this war, not only the physical geography but also the political and cultural geography of our allies and our enemies in the region.

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Who's Pushing the Buttons?

The beheading of two U.S. journalists was seen as a provocation. I am suggesting, however, that it was a planned provocation with calculated results. The IS knew the U.S. would react but would not send ground troops to the Middle East again. They are getting what they wanted—a fight with their border countries. A fight they feel confident they can win. A fight that could, in their minds, credibly justify their expansion in the region and help them achieve their ultimate goal—an Islamic state that encompasses Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, and Palestine.

Is Middle East Policy on Auto-Pilot?

One of the reasons for this confidence lies in widespread mistrust of U.S. policy in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region. Our refusal to strongly and decisively support, or to find some way to convey such support, disregarding and undermining emerging democracies has led many MENA populations to lose hope in the democratic process, making them vulnerable to the IS' propaganda. The U.S.-led war in Iraq based on false weapons of mass destruction evidence, the delayed backing of the Tunisian democratic process, the acceptance of the military coup in Egypt following democratic elections, the intervention in Libya, and the reluctance to intervene in Syria all express our shifting foreign policy and suggest that we do not have a clear understanding of the complex relationships that exist among important groups in any particular MENA country, such as the military, the ruling elite, religious organizations, the population, and the country's regional allies. The complexity lies in the fact that each country has a unique set of circumstances so there is no model to follow. The only navigational device that can steer us is historical, political, and cultural knowledge of the region.

The IS is a result of the "water balloon" phenomenon—squeeze one side and you inflate the other one. While our policies are national interest-driven, these interests are in jeopardy as soon as we become part of the problem. After two years of tireless but vain efforts to clean up Syria after Assad's regime, we naively turned to his most radical opponents to expedite the mission.²

The security vacuum in Syria helped criminal organizations mushroom in



We have won tactically. Our weak point is finding the strategic victory. (Photo by SSgt Ezekiel Kitandwe.)

Understanding Regional Dynamics

Countries in need of help to eliminate ISIS

Countries who can help	SYRIA				IRAQ				LEBANON				JORDON			
	\$	&	#	*	\$	&	#	*	\$	&	#	*	\$	&	#	*
UAE	N	N	N	Y	Y	N	N	N	Y	N	N	N	Y	N	Y	Y
Oman	N	N	N	N/A	Y	N	N	N/A	Y	N	N	N/A	Y	N	Y	N/A
Saudi Arabia	N	N	N	Y	Y	Y	N	N	Y	N	N	N	Y	Y	Y	Y
Iran	Y	N	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	N	Y	Y	Y	N	N	N
Egypt	Y	N	Y	Y	Y	N	Y	N	Y	N	Y	N	Y	N	N	Y
Bahrain	N	N	N	N	Y	N	N	Y	Y	N	N	Y	Y	N	Y	Y
Qatar	N	N	N	Y	Y	N	N	N	Y	N	N	N	Y	N	Y	Y
Turkey	N	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	N	Y	N	Y	N	Y	N	N	Y
Hezbollah	N	Y	Y	N	N	N	N	Y	Y	Y	N	Y	N	N	N	N

Symbols to show what they share

- & Shared borders
- \$ Economic interests
- # Political system
- * Religious communality (Sunni, Shiite)
- Y Yes
- N No

Remarks

Sunni and Shia live all over the Middle East; however, they may be the majority in one country and minority in another. N/A Oman is a Muslim Ibadite community, but different from Sunni and Shia.
 Christian and Druze are counted, but they are minorities in all countries.
 Before the Syrian crisis, all Middle Eastern countries had economic and political ties with Syria.
 Hezbollah is an armed organization that plays an important role in the Libanese and Syrian societies.

Table 1. Full commitment and combat motivation.

the region. The Baghdad administration’s sectarian and clannish behavior further exacerbated the situation. Today, people in the Middle East believe that it was our policy with the complicity of Gulf monarchies that have led to detrimental second- and third-order effects (unwanted outcomes) that now includes the IS.

However, for the first time since the U.S. has been militarily involved in the region, all the local players, regardless of their background or agenda, including organized governments, civil societies, military factions, and perhaps even al-Qaeda, seem to agree on the elimination of the IS and the military role that the U.S. should carry on.³ But do not be misled; this consensus exists only because each element believes: 1)

that their interests are at risk, and 2) that the U.S.’ initial intervention created this situation and so is obligated to clean up the mess. Any hope of creating new alliances with old enemies should be dismissed; as soon as the mission is accomplished, each of these entities will return to business as usual.

Recalculating—The Enemy of My Enemy Is My Friend

Experts in Washington, DC; London; and Paris are advocating for intense and surgical strikes. However, unlike the Taliban regime in Afghanistan, the IS is a well-equipped and multinational “government.”⁴ It also knows that in the worst case scenario, the U.S. and its western allies will bomb the areas they control with no boots on the ground.

The IS has become a common enemy to all the ruling regimes in the region. However, due to numerous conflicts of interest including borders, religious/sect differences, economic interests, and overall distrust of each other, it is difficult to determine if defeating the IS is their top priority and if they can agree on whom to support in this effort. Table 1 identifies some of the conflicts of interests that exist between the Arab nations with whom we are relying on for military, financial, and humanitarian assistance. For example, Saudi Arabia continues to interfere in Yemeni domestic matters, intervenes militarily to save the minority Al-Khalifa regime in Bahrain, supports the Marshal el-Sisi adventure in Egypt, and finances some fighting groups in Syria. Likewise,

Qatar supports other groups in Syria and tries to counter any Saudi initiative. Meanwhile, Egypt and the United Arab Emirates have recently bombed targeted fighter groups in Libya⁵ and the list continues on and on. As of yet, not one of them has acted against the IS. If we are still counting on operational ground support from friendly fighting groups inside Syria, they are all busy struggling to keep their gain. As of 9 September 2014, the Syrian free fighter leader has been assassinated by either one of the other opposing groups or the IS.⁶

Theoretically, we all learn from history and previous mistakes; thus, it is extremely risky to place our bets on the success of a joint Arab military ground force, which has either no history or bad history. Since gaining their independence from the French and British occupations in the early 1950s and 1960s, Arab nation states have never been successful in their military adventures, except maybe Egypt (Suez Canal, 1956). Indeed, Arab coalitions failed to defeat Israel in 1948, 1967, and 1973. For eight years, Saddam Hussein's military struggled to resist Iran, even with U.S. and the Gulf States' financial support. Their best records are in putting down unarmed popular riots and in military coups within the same country. Other weaknesses include:

- No practical conventional or irregular battlespace experience except as U.N. peacekeeping forces or U.S. allies in the rear battlespace support (except, perhaps, Iraqi soldiers in Iraq).
- Their political and military doctrines do not provide a decisive orientation toward fighting outside their borders.
- Indecision on which country will lead the joint military venture.
- No JTF (joint task force).

A final concern that must be considered is the will to fight among the various Arab militaries. When asked about the intelligence community's success in gathering "anticipatory intelligence" on ISIL (Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant) James Clapper, Director of National Intelligence, commented, "what we didn't do was predict the will to fight that's always a problem...we underesti-

mated [ISIL] and overestimated the capability of the Iraqi army...it boils down to predicting the will to fight, which is an imponderable."⁷ I disagree with the observation that the IS fighters' will to fight is imponderable. With the knowledge and experience of al-Qaeda's commitment and determination to fight, the IS' fighters could only be more committed because of the fact that the IS detached itself from the former because it considered them too soft to carry on the long fight. In addition, most of its leadership is composed of young men living in the West who already gave up materialistic privileges they were enjoying in the West. U.S. Marine trainers can tell us a lot about Middle Eastern military capabilities and skills since they have been training them for the last decade, particularly in Iraq, Jordan, Yemen, UAE, and Egypt.⁸ However, I wonder about the commitment of soldiers from these potentially allied countries and how strongly they believe in the fight against ISIL. Belief carries the fight farther than training and force. Recent IS successes in Iraq and Syria have created a great momentum among their fighters combined with their absolute commitment to fight to death.

Conclusion

History is repeating itself. However, this time we don't have a map that we can spread out on the table to help us navigate the conflicts in the region. The cultural, political, and historical geography of the Middle East is too complex to be represented in a two dimensional map. For guidance, we must look to the collective knowledge of both our operational culture specialists and our military personnel who have been actively involved in the region for the last decade. We must fight the IS not with the disjointed brawn of our Middle East allies, but with wit. Just as houses are made of stones, so armies are made of soldiers. But a pile of stones is not a house and a collection of soldiers is not necessarily an army.⁹ Leading from behind is not a failure or sign of weakness. The development community refers to it as finding local solutions for local problems. In the shaping and coming

phases of this war, we must empower our Middle East allies not with weapons but with confidence in our support in their emerging democracies, in belief that we are serious about supporting good governance, economic reform, fair share of resources, and education on the culture of democracy. If not, we once again run the risk of winning tactically but losing strategically.

Notes

1. Franklin D. Roosevelt, speech February 1943 accessed at <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu>.

2. Raialyoum, accessed at <http://www.raialyoum.com>.

3. Cable News Network, "Meet the Terrorists Who Scare Al-Qaeda," accessed at <https://www.youtube.com>.

4. Robin Young and Jeremy Hobson, "Islamic State Structured Like A Government," *90.9 WBUR Boston's NPR News Station*, (Boston: Trustees of Boston University, 9 September 2014), accessed at <http://hereandnow.wbur.org/>

5. Staff, "United Arab Emirates Bombing Raids Libyan Militia," *The Guardian*, (London: Guardian Media Group, August 2014) accessed at <http://www.theguardian.com>.

6. Raialyoum, accessed at <http://www.raialyoum.com>.

7. David Ignatius, "James Clapper: Underestimating the Enemy's 'Will to Fight,'" *The Washington Post*, (Washington, DC: The Washington Post Company, 10 September 2014).

8. Dov S. Zakheim, "The Best Strategy to Handle ISIS Is Good Old Containment," *The National Interest*, (Washington, DC: Center for the National Interest, 24 September 2014), accessed at <http://nationalinterest.org>.

9. Jules Poincaré, rephrased quote, accessed at <http://www.quotationspage.com>.

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