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STRATEGIC ENDS IN THE MIDDLE EAST

Lieutenant Colonel Raymond A. Millen

At times, it is difficult to maintain focus on strategic ends while embroiled in a conflict. This is especially true as soldiers and marines battle Iraqi insurgents under close media scrutiny, while pundits question the Iraq war as a means to the Global War on Terror (GWOT) ends. As a topical issue of rectitude, the decision to invade Iraq needs to pass to the historians—continued debate on that issue is a distraction. As a question of strategy, the toppling of Iraq has provided the United States with an opportunity to strike at the heart of al Qaeda and its ideological kin, which heretofore have been protected by the residual effects of Cold War inertia. Ultimately, the GWOT will be decided in the Middle East, so sooner or later, the campaign strategy has to converge there.

Perhaps it is unfair to say, but the Middle East appears to excel in two areas: pumping out oil and spawning extremists. Certainly, the vast majority of Middle East states provide a permissible environment for the litany of organizations that have no qualms in using terrorism to promote their agendas. Dysfunctional and corrupt governance, atrocious economic and social conditions, and anti-Israeli exhortations to divert domestic attention have created fertile recruitment for agents of terrorism. As long as the bloodshed was limited to the region, the situation was lamentable but manageable. Once al Qaeda internationalized its activities and started a global insurgency aimed at toppling the United States, the dynamics of international diplomacy changed dramatically. What was once unthinkable—transforming the political landscape of the Middle East—became achievable.

The U.S. strategic goal in the Middle East campaign must be the creation of stable, progressive, and democratized states. Given the vast inequities between the ruling class and hoi polloi, needed reforms are not going to come about through enlightened diplomacy. In this vein, the liberation of Iraq has provided the physical and psychological beachhead for the prosecution of the Middle East campaign, but any expectation that the remaining regimes would welcome democracy or would accept the inevitable is downright naive. Regional democratization must be nurtured, nudged, and sometimes asserted. Having asserted U.S. authority in the region, the next critical objective must be the resolution of the Arab-Israeli conflict.

It is important to bear in mind that campaign strategy is determined by the probability of success and not the ease of execution, as the ongoing insurgency in Iraq illustrates. The resolution of the Arab-Israeli conflict will be difficult and bitter, but also feasible. Amazingly, the United States and the European Union have been far too patient with the chicanery of both the Israeli government and Palestinian authority. Given the pathological cycle of violence to which the conflict has descended, the United States and Europe must recognize that Israel and the Palestinian authority are incapable of conflict resolution diplomatically. U.S./EU resolve can be best demonstrated by implementing the peace plan with an enforcement mechanism. Specifically, the

insertion of peace enforcement troops into the West Bank and Gaza Strip is essential. No one should harbor illusions with this course of action. Neither side will be happy with the arrangements and will attempt to derail its implementation with violence. But the evenhandedness of the peace enforcement will eventually ameliorate the most divisive issue in the Middle East. Understandably, national policymakers cannot ignore domestic political pressures, but neither should these pressures sway them from implementing a policy that reaps such rewards and permits the continuation of the GWOT strategy.

With a resolution of the Arab-Israeli conflict, the impetus of regional reform will become considerable, with the United States and EU applying more economic and diplomatic incentives and less coercion for the institution of deep political, economic, and social reforms.

A loss of U.S. resolve resulting from the insurgency in Iraq would be a monumental tragedy because it would give extremist groups respite. They will use the reprieve to reorganize and continue the global insurgency and eventually will acquire a weapons of mass destruction (WMD) capability. The United States can avoid this outcome by reducing the resources of extremist organizations to such a degree that they lack the funding, recruitment, and sophistication to acquire and employ WMD. Cleansing the Middle East of extremist spider nests is the most effective means to the GWOT ends.