

The Islamic Way of War

Muslims have stopped fighting on Western terms—and have started winning.

By **Andrew J. Bacevich**

IN IRAQ, the world's only superpower finds itself mired in a conflict that it cannot win. History's mightiest military has been unable to defeat an enemy force of perhaps 20,000 to 30,000 insurgents equipped with post-World War II vintage assault rifles and anti-tank weapons.

In Gaza and southern Lebanon, the Middle East's mightiest military also finds itself locked in combat with adversaries that it cannot defeat. Despite weeks of bitter fighting, the IDF's Merkava tanks, F16 fighter-bombers, and missile-launching unmanned aerial vehicles failed to suppress, much less eliminate, the armed resistance of Hamas and Hezbollah.

What are we to make of this? How is it that the seemingly weak and primitive are able to frustrate modern armies only recently viewed as all but invincible? What do the parallel tribulations—and embarrassments—of the United States and Israel have to tell us about war and politics in the 21st century? In short, what's going on here?

The answer to that question is disarmingly simple: the sun has set on the age of unquestioned Western military dominance. Bluntly, the East has solved the riddle of the Western Way of War. In Baghdad and in Anbar Province at various points on Israel's troubled perimeter, the message is clear: methods that once could be counted on to deliver swift decision no longer work.

For centuries, Western military might underpinned Western political dominion everywhere from Asia to Africa to the

New World. It was not virtue that created the overseas empires of Great Britain, France, Spain, and the other European colonizers; it was firepower, technology, and discipline.

Through much of the last century, nowhere was this Western military pre-eminence more in evidence than in the Middle East. During World War I, superior power enabled the British and French to topple the Ottomans, carve up the region to suit their own interests, and then rule it like a fiefdom. Until 1945, European machine guns kept restive Arabs under control in Egypt, Iraq, Syria, and Palestine.

The end of World War II found the Europeans without the will to operate the machine guns and short on the money to pay for them. In the Middle East, Arabs no longer willing to follow instructions issued by London or Paris demanded independence. Eager to claim prestige and respect, these nationalists, Egypt's Gamal Abdel Nasser foremost among them, saw in the creation of large machine-age armies a shortcut to achieving their goals.

Placing an order for Soviet-bloc armaments in 1955, Nasser began an ill-fated Arab flirtation with Western-style military technique that did not fully end until Saddam Hussein's army collapsed on the outskirts of Baghdad nearly a half-century later. Throughout the 1960s and 1970s, Arab leaders invested in fleets of tanks, field artillery, and other heavy armaments, which they organized into massive formations supported by costly air forces equipped with supersonic jets.

On the ground, bigger meant better; in the air, speed was thought to signify superiority.

All of these pricy exertions yielded only humiliation and indignity. Israel—a Western implant in the Muslim world—also adopted Western-style military methods but with far greater success, subjecting the Arabs to repeated drubbings. Designed on the Soviet model, the new Arab armies turned out to be ponderous and predictable but with little of the Red Army's capacity to absorb punishment and keep fighting. Taking the best of the German military tradition, the Israel Defense Forces placed a premium on daring, dash, and decentralization as they demonstrated to great effect in 1956, 1967, and 1973.

What was it that made the IDF in its heyday look so good? According to the punch line of an old joke: because they always fought Arabs. In 1991, the Americans finally had their own chance to fight Arabs, and they too looked good, making mincemeat of Saddam Hussein's legions in Operation Desert Storm. In the spring of 2003, the Americans looked good once again, dispatching the remnant of Saddam's army in a short and seemingly decisive campaign. In Washington many concluded that an unstoppable U.S. military machine could provide the leverage necessary to transform the entire region.

The truth is that U.S. forces and the IDF looked good fighting Arabs only as long as Arab political leaders insisted on fighting on Western terms. As long as they persisted in pitting tank against

tank or fighter plane against fighter plane, Arabs were never going to get the better of either the Americans or the Israelis. His stupidity perhaps matched only by his ruthlessness, Saddam may well have been the last Arab leader to figure this out.

Well before Saddam's final defeat, others, less stupid, began to develop alternative means of what they called "resistance." This new Islamic Way of War evolved over a period of decades not only in the Arab world but beyond.

In Afghanistan during the 1980s, the Mujahadeen got things started by bringing to its knees a Soviet army equipped with an arsenal of modern equipment. During the so-called First Intifada, which began in 1987, stone-throwing and Molotov-cocktail-wielding Palestinians gave the IDF conniptions. In 1993, an angry Somali rabble—not an army at all—sent the United States packing. In 2000, the collapse of the Camp David talks produced a Second Intifada, this one persuading the government of Ariel Sharon that Israeli occupation of Gaza and the West Bank was becoming unsustainable. Most spectacularly, in September 2001, al-Qaeda engineered a successful assault on the American homeland, the culmination of a series of attacks that had begun a decade earlier.

First in Afghanistan and then in Iraq, the United States seemed briefly to turn the tables: Western military methods overthrew the Taliban and then made short shrift of Saddam. After the briefest of intervals, however, victory in both places gave way to renewed and protracted fighting. Most recently, in southern Lebanon an intervention that began with Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert vowing to destroy Hezbollah has run aground and looks increasingly like an Israeli defeat.

So it turns out that Arabs—or more broadly Muslims—can fight after all. We may surmise that they now realize that

fighting effectively requires that they do so on their own terms rather than mimicking the West. They don't need and don't want tanks and fighter-bombers. What many Westerners dismiss as "terrorism," whether directed against Israelis, Americans, or others in the West, ought to be seen as a panoply of techniques employed to undercut the apparent advantages of high-tech conventional forces. The methods employed do include terrorism—violence targeting civilians for purposes of intimidation—but they also incorporate propaganda, subversion, popular agitation, economic warfare, and hit-and-run attacks on regular forces, either to induce an overreaction or to wear them down. The common theme of those techniques, none of which are new, is this: avoid the enemy's strengths; exploit enemy vulnerabilities.

What are the implications of this new Islamic Way of War? While substantial, they fall well short of being apocalyptic. As Gen. Peter Pace, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, has correctly—if perhaps a trifle defensively—observed, "Our enemy knows they cannot defeat us in battle." Neither the Muslim world nor certainly the Arab world poses what some like to refer to as "an existential threat" to the United States. Despite overheated claims that the so-called Islamic fascists pose a danger greater than Hitler ever did, the United States is not going to be overrun, even should the forces of al-Qaeda, Hamas, Hezbollah, Iraqi insurgents, and Shi'ite militias along with Syria and Iran all combine into a unified anti-Crusader coalition. Although Israelis for historical reasons are inclined to believe otherwise, the proximate threat to Israel itself is only marginally greater. Although neither Israel nor the United States can guarantee its citizens "perfect security"—what nation can?—both enjoy ample capabilities for self-defense.

What the Islamic Way of War does mean to both Israel and to the United States is this: the Arabs now possess—and know that they possess—the capacity to deny us victory, especially in any altercation that occurs on their own turf and among their own people. To put it another way, neither Israel nor the United States today possesses anything like the military muscle needed to impose its will on the various governments, nation-states, factions, and political movements that comprise our list of enemies. For politicians in Jerusalem or Washington to persist in pretending otherwise is the sheerest folly.

It's time for Americans to recognize that the enterprise that some neoconservatives refer to as World War IV is unwinnable in a strictly military sense. Indeed, it's past time to re-examine the post-Cold War assumption that military power provides the preferred antidote to any and all complaints that we have with the world beyond our borders.

In the Middle East and more broadly in our relations with the Islamic world, we face difficult and dangerous problems, more than a few of them problems to which we ourselves have contributed. Those problems will become more daunting still, for us and for Israel, should a nation like Iran succeed in acquiring nuclear weapons. But as events in Iraq and now in southern Lebanon make clear, reliance on the sword alone will not provide a solution to those problems. We must be strong and we must be vigilant. But we also need to be smart, and getting smart means ending our infatuation with war and rediscovering the possibilities of politics. ■

Andrew J. Bacevich is professor of history and international relations at Boston University. His most recent book, The New American Militarism, is just out in paperback from Oxford University Press.

The Enemy of My Enemy

The U.S.-Israeli fixation on Hezbollah and Hamas undermines our pursuit of al-Qaeda.

By Anders Strindberg

FOR THE PAST SEVERAL YEARS, the primary bulwarks against the spread of al-Qaeda's brand of Salafi Islamism into Lebanon and the Palestinian territories have been Hezbollah and Hamas, respectively. While it may not fit well with the black-and-white worldview that provides the backdrop for the war against terrorism, the fact is that these two movements have been far more successful at limiting the influence of Salafism within their respective jurisdictions than any of the regional friends and allies of the United States. Even so, as fierce fighting is reducing Lebanon and the Gaza Strip to rubble, the United States has underwritten the Israeli government's policy that any acceptable political solution must entail the military destruction of Hezbollah and Hamas. Consequently, both movements find themselves the principal targets in the war against terrorism.

Given Hezbollah and Hamas's willingness and ability to stem the rising tide of Salafist militancy, targeting these two movements means that the war against terrorism itself threatens to enable the infiltration and entrenchment of al-Qaeda and its fellow travelers in countries so far denied them. The priorities of the administration seem not only to miss the mark in the fight against terrorism but to constitute a grievous strategic error.

The enmity between Hezbollah and Hamas, on the one hand, and the Salafist trend on the other is in part a matter of practical politics. The former two have been well aware that the emergence of al-Qaeda affiliates in either of their

respective territories would serve as a pretext for harsher U.S. and Israeli actions against them and their constituents. Indeed, Israeli military intelligence has repeatedly floated "information" linking Hamas and al-Qaeda with a view to more firmly incorporating Israel's fight against its enemies into the U.S.-led global war on terror.

Moreover, Hezbollah and Hamas are well established political movements that simply do not want to share their local power bases with Islamist groups of a different ideological hue. Yet it is the nature of this ideological difference that is crucial to understanding the depth of their enmity towards the Salafist project.

While Hezbollah/Hamas and al-Qaeda and its affiliates are engaged in what they see as a resistance project, they are not engaged in the same resistance project. The struggles of the former two are territorial, directed against a specific enemy—Israel—and rooted in the needs and aspirations of specific peoples. Through modern institutions these movements aim to empower their constituents, to whom they also stand directly accountable in democratic elections as well as in terms of a more general approval of their actions. Importantly, they form part of, and co-operate within, a pluralistic spectrum of ideologies and creeds within their respective arenas. While it may not sit well with the U.S. public discourse, neither Hezbollah nor Hamas are enemies of the U.S. other than by inferred extension of their enmity with Israel.

In sharp contrast, al-Qaeda's struggle is rooted in Wahhabi theology, the tribal legacies of Saudi Arabia, and the military experiences of Afghanistan, the Balkans, and Somalia. It wages a cosmic war against the impure values of the West and stands accountable to no specific constituency because it limits its struggle to no specific territory. It seeks to create alternatives to the modern institutions "imported" from the West. It rejects, other than on tactical grounds, political and religious pluralism because it views everyone outside the Salafist sphere as infidels or apostates. It is important to understand that even Hezbollah and Hamas are seen as part of this circle of apostates: the former on account of its Shi'a theology, the latter due to its co-operation with Hezbollah and the various secular Palestinian militant groups and movements. Al-Qaeda is a direct sworn enemy of the U.S. and appears to care little for confrontation with Israel. "Otherwise," as one Palestinian official remarked, "the bastards would have driven those planes [on 9/11] into buildings in Israel, not New York and Washington."

Hezbollah, which operates an effective intelligence apparatus, has carefully monitored Salafist movements for the past several years. It has used a combination of carrots and sticks, most often discreetly, to curb the spread of the new ideology among its constituents. Sometimes it has come to blows. For instance, in response to an uprising linked to al-Qaeda affiliates in the northern coastal