

YOUR KINDLE NOTES FOR:

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

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36 Highlight(s) | 0 Note(s)

Yellow highlight | Location: 291

> Notably absent from this analysis, however, was any appreciation for context. Tucker and Ignotus alike showed no interest in the recent history of the Middle East. They ignored the dubious legacy of previous Western interventionism, especially by Great Britain, until recently the region's imperial overlord. That the United States was willy-nilly supplanting the British as the dominant power in the Arab world and more broadly in the Greater Middle East ought to have given Americans pause. After all, the lessons to be taken from the British experience were almost entirely cautionary ones. That was not a baton that the Americans were grasping but a can of worms.

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> This first round of proposals to militarize U.S. policy in the Middle East found little favor in the Pentagon. Ever since World War II, apart from the brief intervention in Lebanon that Dwight D. Eisenhower had ordered back in 1958—a virtually bloodless comma inserted between Korea and Vietnam—America's military had by and large steered clear of the region, leaving it in the hands of diplomats and spooks.8 Now, in the early 1970s, U.S. forces had

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> So when Secretary of Defense Elliott Richardson released his annual report to Congress in April 1973, he evinced little interest in the Middle East and only perfunctory concern about energy security. The 126-page document devoted exactly one anodyne paragraph to each. In the first, Richardson expressed his hope for an end to "the

> potentially explosive Arab-Israeli conflict." He cited U.S. arms sales and its "limited military presence" as intended "to produce stability" and to encourage negotiations. Yet Richardson also made it clear that the core problem wasn't Washington's to solve: "Peace and stability will be possible only if all the parties involved develop a mutual interest in accommodation and restraint."

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> In the second paragraph, while noting that the Persian Gulf contained "approximately one-half of the world's proven oil reserves," Richardson emphasized that the United States would look "primarily to the states in the area to maintain peace and stability."9 Pentagon priorities lay elsewhere. A year later, in the wake of the October War and with Americans still reeling from the first oil shock, Richardson's successor James R. Schlesinger made it clear that those priorities had not changed. The Pentagon remained fixated on the U.S.-Soviet competition. When the United States evaluated threats to national security, Schlesinger wrote, "We do so primarily with the Soviet Union in mind."

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> For Rumsfeld too, therefore, the Middle East remained an afterthought. The United States had a "fundamental interest in uninterrupted access to Middle East oil and gas," he acknowledged. But satisfying that interest was not going to entail the commitment of U.S. forces and was not going to absorb any substantial part of the Pentagon's budget. The troops and the dollars were needed elsewhere. So Rumsfeld affirmed Washington's preference for outsourcing the problem to "reliable friendly forces (for example Iran, Saudi Arabia, Morocco) capable of contributing to regional order." Arming "friendly, important governments" that were themselves "striving to maintain peace and stability in the region" promised to suffice.11 Through the mid-1970s, in other words,

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> Still, if Nixon's aims and the Shah's ambitions did not "dovetail neatly," as one New York Times dispatch suggested, they at least

intersected.17 As one immediate consequence, U.S. arms exports to Iran skyrocketed. Between 1950 and 1972, the United States had provided Iran with approximately $1.5 billion of weapons, the costs largely covered by grant aid. By 1973 Tehran had become a paying customer. That year alone, it agreed to purchase U.S. arms to the tune of more than $2 billion.18 Over the next six years, Iran contracted to buy over $19 billion in weapons. Purchases included F-14 fighters, C-130 transport aircraft, and guided missile destroyers, plus helicopters, tanks, and air defense missiles.19 In 1978, the now-besieged Iranian monarch presented Washington with a shopping list requesting an additional $12 billion in military hardware. The Shah did not get everything he requested—just almost everything. Indeed, after considerable wrangling, the United States even agreed to provide Iran with nuclear reactors, the Shah offering personal—if suspect—assurances that Iran had no intention of acquiring nuclear weapons.20 This was the precursor to the Iranian nuclear program destined in the twenty-first century to become a source of such controversy and concern.

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The Shah's overthrow, wrote Zbigniew Brzezinski, President Carter's national security adviser, had shattered the "protected tier shielding the crucial oil-rich region of the Persian Gulf from possible Soviet intrusion." What better way to prevent the Kremlin from capitalizing on this opportunity than to throw in with the "Afghan freedom fighters" opposed to Soviet meddling in Afghan affairs.42 Fomenting trouble in Afghanistan would dissuade the Soviets from meddling in the Persian Gulf. Such was the expectation, at least. So the explicit purpose of aiding Afghan insurgents, Brzezinski subsequently acknowledged, was to "induce a Soviet military intervention," which the United States intended to exploit for its own purposes.43

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Pakistan and Iran."53 Carter himself endorsed this view, characterizing Soviet actions in Afghanistan as "an unprecedented act" and "the most serious threat to world peace since the Second World War," thereby ranking it above the Berlin Blockade, the Korean War, and the Cuban Missile Crisis on the roster of Cold War emergencies.54 Administration critics advanced an even

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> The president who just months before had earnestly sought to persuade Americans to shake their addiction to oil now decried—even as he exaggerated—the possibility of outsiders preventing Americans from getting their daily fix. This he refused to permit. “Let our position be absolutely clear,” Carter continued. “An attempt by any outside force to gain control of the Persian Gulf region will be regarded as an assault on the vital interests of the United States of America, and such an assault will be repelled by any means necessary, including military force.”

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> This statement, subsequently enshrined as the Carter Doctrine, inaugurated America’s War for the Greater Middle East. The United States was not going to seize Persian Gulf oil directly, as Robert Tucker and Miles Ignotus had once urged. Instead, it was going to prevent a hostile takeover of the Persian Gulf, thereby ensuring that Americans and their allies would not want for oil. The moment bears comparison with the

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> Washington did not act unilaterally in Afghanistan. Rather, it drew on the assistance of a very substantial “coalition of the willing”—or perhaps, more accurately, a coalition of the dissimilar—that included not only Pakistan but also Egypt, Saudi Arabia, China, the United Kingdom, and Israel. Beyond a shared hostility toward the Soviet Union, motives for participation differed, as did perceptions of the stakes involved.

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> Yet two things distinguished this particular conglomeration of strange bedfellows. First, none of the participants cared a lick for the Afghan people. Second, apart from Pakistan, none attributed any intrinsic value to Afghanistan itself. What lent that impoverished,

> landlocked country its fleeting political significance was the Soviet presence there. End that presence and Afghanistan would command as much international attention as Fiji. As a result, policymakers intent on making Afghanistan a staging ground for a “Vietnamese quagmire” paid scant attention to exactly what that might imply once the agents of mayhem left the scene. “We expected post-Soviet Afghanistan to be ugly,” Robert Gates, then a CIA official, later confessed, “but never considered that it would become a haven for terrorists operating worldwide.”3

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> Another Time dispatch reported that by 1985 support for Afghan insurgents from the United States alone had reached $470 million per year, albeit with some “seepage” going to Pakistan.7 In the self-aggrandizing American narrative of the war, the turning point came the following year when Reagan made the gutsy decision to provide the Afghan resistance with Stinger anti-aircraft missiles. By reducing the threat posed by Soviet attack helicopters, the Stingers gave the mujahedin a decisive edge. All of this was supposedly hush-hush and top secret—although readers of The Washington Post quickly learned about it over their morning coffee.8

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> Notably, the entire enterprise enjoyed broad bipartisan support on Capitol Hill. Democrats might bridle at the Reagan administration’s efforts to undermine the leftist Sandinistas governing Nicaragua, but they had no objection whatsoever to arming Afghan insurgents.9

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> President Reagan wasted no time declaring his “outrage and revulsion over the murders,” offering his condolences to the “broader Palestinian community” and fingering Israel as responsible. He all but ordered the Israeli government to withdraw its forces from Beirut forthwith.18 Within days, he also decided to reinsert U.S. Marines into that city. As part of a multinational peacekeeping force, they were to establish “a presence in Beirut, that would in turn help establish the stability necessary for the Lebanese government to regain control of

> their capital."19 How exactly the Marines were to accomplish such an ambitious task, even if assisted by other small allied contingents, was not at all clear. Still, Reagan himself expressed confidence that it could be done. Conditions were ripe, he insisted, for the United States to take "bold and timely initiatives" to free Lebanon of foreign forces and undertake a "systematic program to rebuild Lebanese security forces."20

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> Yet almost immediately, confusion and doubt all but paralyzed his administration. Reagan's directive called for retaliating against those who had perpetrated the October 23 Beirut bombing, "subject to reasonable confirmation of the locations of suitable targets." The caveat provided an opening for opponents of further military escalation—notably Secretary of Defense Weinberger and General John Vessey, who chaired the Joint Chiefs of Staff—to block retaliatory action. Instead, they sought to terminate the Marine presence altogether.41 Meanwhile, the conflict in Lebanon ground on, belying Reagan's expectations of that country regaining its independence and sovereignty. U.S. military involvement in that conflict mirrored the dithering that consumed Washington. Despite the continued material support and firepower provided by the United States, the Lebanese army was failing—not the last time that American efforts to "build" an army in the Islamic world would fall short.

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> By the end of January 1984, Reagan himself was ready to throw in the towel, directing the Pentagon to plan for withdrawing the Marines, although allowing for the possibility of a "continuing U.S. military presence offshore." Although Reagan wanted efforts to prop up the Lebanese army to continue, the United States was opting out of the fight.43 "We're not bugging out," the president insisted. "We're just going to a little more defensible position."44 Few found the claim persuasive. On February 26, 1984, the last Marines departed Beirut International Airport. In a fit of pique, the New Jersey and other warships, under the pretense of providing covering fire, blasted away at targets ashore.45 This time, the "Mission Accomplished" banner was nowhere to be seen. Summing things up in The New York Times,

> Thomas Friedman wrote that the Marines had “accomplished virtually nothing.”46 The judgment remains difficult to dispute. Policy failures typically produce some sort

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> If so, he did not remain there for long. Less than two years later, the State Department spokesperson admitted that the United States had seen “no evidence that Libya has abandoned support of international terrorism, subversion, and aggression.”25 Soon enough, events affirmed the truth of that statement. On December 21, 1988, as Reagan was preparing to hand the presidency over to George H. W. Bush, a device planted by Libyan agents blew up Pan Am flight 103 over Lockerbie, Scotland, killing all 259 passengers and crew, 189 Americans among them, along with eleven others on the ground.26 The United States did not retaliate against Gaddafi for engineering this atrocity. If U.S. policymakers intended their response to the Berlin disco bombing to demonstrate that terrorists were no longer going to get away with murdering Americans, the non-response to the destruction of Pan Am 103 showed that they still could. Clearly, as an exercise in behavior modification through bombing, Operation El Dorado Canyon had a transitory impact at best. Even so, U.S. policymakers clung to their belief that armed might could somehow provide the ultimate solution to terrorism.

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> Now change was in the wind. In February 1982, the State Department quietly “de-designated” Iraq as a sponsor of terrorism. Fence-mending U.S. envoys began visiting Baghdad. Friendly messages from Secretary of State Shultz to his Iraqi counterpart emphasized the “very important common interests” shared by the two countries.6 Although the full restoration of diplomatic relations did not occur until November 1984, that qualified as mere window dressing. A visit to Baghdad the previous December by former (and future) defense secretary Donald Rumsfeld, acting as Ronald Reagan’s personal representative, had sealed the deal. Rumsfeld’s ceremonial handshake with Saddam, videotaped for posterity, signaled that the United States had joined the ranks of the anti-Persian (and therefore anti-Shiite) axis. The prior U.S. policy of neutrality with regard to the Iran-Iraq War was now defunct. During his visit to Baghdad, Rumsfeld

> assured Saddam that any resolution of the ongoing war “which weakens Iraq’s role or enhances [the] interests and ambitions of Iran” was not going to find favor in Washington. Along those lines, the United States was “encouraging others not to sell weapons to Iran” and would continue to do so.7 Rumsfeld was alluding to Operation Staunch, a State Department initiative launched earlier in 1983 to prevent Iran from acquiring arms and particularly the spare parts needed to maintain weapons of U.S. origin.

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> battlefield losses.8 (“Looking the other way” also describes the U.S. response when Israel began secretly selling Iran large quantities of U.S. arms and spare parts to sustain the Ayatollah Khomeini’s war machine. Ostensible allies, Israel and the United States thus found themselves supporting opposite sides in a war in which both warring parties were stridently anti-Israel and anti-American.)

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> In what became known as the Iran-Contra affair, the Reagan administration was secretly and illegally diverting U.S. weapons to Iran, with the government of Israel serving as obliging middleman.12 The motives behind this initiative, initially hatched in 1981 but fully implemented only in 1985, were twofold. First, members of the administration, very much including the president himself, hoped that weapons transfers might purchase Tehran’s assistance in negotiating the release of several Americans kidnapped in Lebanon and presumed to be held hostage in the wake of the failed U.S. intervention there.13 Further, fancying that a small deal might lead to something much bigger, they hoped thereby to establish contact with Iranian “moderates” who might welcome the prospect of ending the U.S.-Iranian estrangement and thereby restoring relations to some approximation of what had existed under the Shah.

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> With the passing of time, McCain’s became very much the minority view, however. An increasingly energized, if informal, Bosnian Muslim lobby rejected the excuses offered up to explain Clinton’s fumbling

> effort. Already in July 1993, The Washington Post was deriding the administration's defense of its Bosnia policy as "petty and embarrassing."16 That same month, in an amply publicized act of solidarity, Susan Sontag, doyenne of the American intelligentsia, had gone to Sarajevo. Recounting her experience in a widely read essay appearing in The New York Review of Books, Sontag denounced the United States and the West for "giving the victory to Serb fascism." In the Bosnian capital, she had staged Beckett's Waiting for Godot, even though Sarajevans, she acknowledged, were actually "waiting for Clinton."17 By early the following year, The New Republic was castigating the White House for "indifference" and "timidity" in the face of out-and-out genocide. "Poor Bosnia," the editors wrote, "it should have found itself in a trade war. Trade wars we fight. Wars of genocide we watch."18 To the influential academic Fouad Ajami, the Bosnians represented the potential for reconciling Islam itself with modernity. Bosnian Serb leaders such as Radovan Karadžić claimed that they were "defending Christianity against militant Islamic fundamentalism."19 Just the reverse was true, Professor Ajami insisted. Bosnian Muslims were the "true bearers of a universal culture, children of the secular environment of the West."20 Here, according to observers such as Ajami,

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> Concerns related to cultural pluralism, human rights, and protecting Muslims said to share a Western secular outlook kept Bosnia on the front pages. However, they did not suffice to prod the Clinton administration to take the more muscular approach that Bosnia's sympathizers were demanding. What ultimately prompted Clinton to act was a core geopolitical interest: preserving the viability of NATO. For decades, the alliance had formed the cornerstone of Washington's claim to European leadership. Deny Flight represented a first post–Cold War attempt to demonstrate the alliance's continuing relevance. Viewed from this perspective, that operation's evident failure was intolerable. If Bosnian Serbs could defy NATO and get away with it, the alliance was finished, perhaps fatally undermining America's claim to European preeminence.

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> Although President Clinton's post-Mogadishu aversion to committing

> U.S. ground troops to combat remained intact, his administration was more than open to collaborating with surrogates. Since 1993, in acts of solidarity more substantial than Sontag's, the governments of Iran and Saudi Arabia (not sharing Sontag's or Ajami's outlook on religion) had competed with one another in funneling weapons worth hundreds of millions of dollars to Bosnian Muslim forces. Although these efforts violated the UN embargo, they reportedly occurred with Washington's knowledge and tacit assent.21 Several thousand "holy warriors" from Iran, Pakistan, and elsewhere in the Islamic world converged on Bosnia to wage jihad on behalf of their fellow Muslims.22 Just as they were not innocent, Bosnians were not powerless.

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> For Serbs, Kosovo possessed a significance akin to that which many Americans accord to Gettysburg. It was sacred ground, site of an epic, nation-defining battle against the Turks in 1389. Yet the Muslims who had made Kosovo their home since and who now greatly outnumbered the Serbs living there saw it as rightfully theirs. Indeed, these Kosovo Albanians, or Kosovars, aspired to follow the precedent of the Slovenes, Croats, Bosnians, and Macedonians in leaving Yugoslavia to go their own way. Serb alarm at this prospect, further enflamed by the nationalist demagoguery of Slobodan Milošević, made the issue essentially non-negotiable.

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> The grandly named Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA), created in 1993, offered the best hope of deliverance. As armies go, the KLA left much to be desired, however. As late as 1996, it consisted of no more than 150 fighters and commanded little popular following. Yet by early 1998, it had mustered sufficient capacity to launch a series of harassing attacks against Serbs in Kosovo. These included assassinations, kidnappings, and bombings. U.S. officials denounced the KLA as a terrorist organization, giving Slobodan Milošević reason to believe that he had tacit American permission to crush the group. In the summer of 1998, he set out to do just that. A heavy-handed campaign of repression dealt the KLA a severe setback but also created a huge refugee crisis that attracted widespread media attention. For Milošević, the two hundred thousand Kosovar refugees

> were a public relations disaster. For the KLA, they represented a bonanza.12

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> Milošević was playing right into his opponents' hands. The cycle of KLA incitements and Serb reprisals was ineluctably drawing the United States and its allies into Kosovo's fight for independence.13 By October 1998, with the bellicose Madeleine Albright having now replaced the bland Warren Christopher as secretary of state, Washington was issuing ultimatums. Milošević had "not complied fully with the demands of the international community," Albright charged. Either that was now going to stop or Serbia was going to face punitive military action. "We have made it clear to Milosevic and Kosovars," Albright emphasized, "that we do not support independence for Kosovo—that we want Serbia out of Kosovo, not Kosovo out of Serbia."14 As a practical matter, Albright's stated objectives were inherently at odds with one another. To evict the Serbs was necessarily to hand independence-minded KLA terrorists a victory. After posting the eviction notice, the United

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> A chorus of militant voices rose up to endorse that proposal. Writing in The Weekly Standard, for example, Robert Kagan and William Kristol commended Lugar and other Republicans who were calling for escalation. At issue in Kosovo, they wrote, was "the single overriding question of our time: Will the United States and its allies have the will to shape the world in conformance with our interests and our principles…? Or will we allow much of the world to slip into chaos and brutality?" The key was to win a decisive military victory, which meant that the United States needed to "liberate Kosovo" and "drive Milošević from power."38

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> Senator John McCain sounded a similar note. He denounced the Clinton administration for having "waged war on the cheap," with saving Kosovars taking a backseat to avoiding U.S. casualties. McCain professed to find the president's reluctance to invade Kosovo

> “mystifying.” Only a large-scale ground offensive could “rescue the nation’s security and honor from the calamity” that Clinton’s bungling had produced.39 In short, the clamor triggered by the absence of immediate military success imparted to Kosovo greatly elevated significance. The stakes at issue there assumed seemingly cosmic proportions.

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> Of equal importance, the KLA had bounced back. Under the cover of allied air attacks, they reconstituted their forces and returned to the offensive. As had Operation Determined Force, Allied Force benefited from a proxy ground component. For Milošević, the last straw came on May 27,

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> Predominantly Muslim nations that had rallied to support Bosnians in their time of trial now competed with one another to assist the Kosovars, with the KLA the ultimate beneficiary. The Saudi government provided millions of dollars of relief supplies to aid the refugees who had fled Kosovo.50 For its part, Iran had covertly supplied the KLA with funds and arms.51 Israeli foreign minister Ariel Sharon went so far as to charge Iran with fostering the emergence of an Islamic state in Kosovo.52 Americans might be insufficiently attuned to Kosovo’s relevance to developments elsewhere in the Greater Middle East, but the ever-alert Sharon was not. No doubt Sharon’s worries on that score, stemming from a self-serving Israeli perspective, were overstated. Yet anyone inclined to dismiss such concerns out of hand should consider the fate suffered by the Serbs who had inhabited Kosovo, some of them for generations, now, in the wake of Allied Force, expelled as ethnic and religious undesirables even as U.S. troops stood by, mutely bearing

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> In reality, the Bush administration invaded Iraq in order to validate three precedent-setting and mutually reinforcing propositions. First, the United States was intent on establishing the efficacy of preventive war. Second, it was going to assert the prerogative, permitted to no

> other country, of removing regimes that Washington deemed odious. And finally, it was seeking to reverse the practice of exempting the Islamic world from neoliberal standards, demonstrating that what Condoleezza Rice called “the paradigm of progress”—democracy, limited government, market economics, and respect for human (and especially women’s) rights—was as applicable to the Greater Middle East as to the rest of the world.5 Here in concrete and

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> That the Iraqi people were largely secular, upwardly mobile, and united in their yearning for liberation—a fanciful image nursed within the upper reaches of the Bush administration—figured as a bonus. In other words, what made it imperative to invade Iraq was not the danger it posed but the opportunity it presented.

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> In Baghdad itself, a purge had preceded the surge. Many months of fierce fighting between Sunnis and Shia (and among Shiite factions) had effectively ended the commingling of sectarian antagonists in the Iraqi capital. By early 2007, Baghdad appeared intent on replicating mid-twentieth century Boston or Chicago: Mixed neighborhoods had become a thing of the past. Physical separation greatly reduced levels of violence, which Petraeus’s troops had not induced but merely affirmed and policed.45

Note:

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> What set the Afghanistan War apart was not that it was the longest war in U.S. history but that it was more quickly forgotten than any other conflict in which the United States had ever participated. As if by mutual agreement, the American people and their government erased the Afghanistan experience from memory even before the bloodletting

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> Obama’s hopes came to naught, however. It was Iraq all over again:

> Getting rid of the evil dictator turned out to be the easy part. An intervention justified by the imperative of protecting innocents and averting instability produced the precise opposite of the results intended. Once Gaddafi was gone, the factions that had joined together to overthrow him turned on one another. A country once defined by its leader's zany antics now became synonymous with outright anarchy. The state ceased to function. The plight of desperate Libyans seeking to escape became an international scandal, with thousands losing their lives trying to cross the Mediterranean into Europe. The principal beneficiaries of Gaddafi's removal were human traffickers and radical Islamists as Libya became the site of Al Qaeda's newest franchise. By 2015, the country was a basket case and seemed likely to remain one for the indefinite future.29 In Iraq, the presence of U.S. troops on the

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