

# STRATEGIKA

Conflicts Of The Past As Lessons For The Present

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## THE MIDDLE EAST TERRORISM FOREVER?

IN THIS ISSUE

REUEL MARC GERECHT • BING WEST • THOMAS DONNELLY

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# CONTENTS

JULY 2017 • ISSUE 43

## BACKGROUND ESSAY

**“Pushing Back” Iran**  
by Reuel Marc Gerecht

## FEATURED COMMENTARY

**The Middle East: Terrorism Forever?**  
by Bing West

**Beyond the Terror War**  
by Thomas Donnelly

## EDUCATIONAL MATERIALS

**Discussion Questions**

**Suggestions for Further Reading**



## ABOUT THE POSTERS IN THIS ISSUE

Documenting the wartime viewpoints and diverse political sentiments of the twentieth century, the Hoover Institution Library & Archives Poster Collection has more than one hundred thousand posters from around the world and continues to grow. Thirty-three thousand are available online. Posters from the United States, the United Kingdom, Germany, Russia/Soviet Union, and France predominate, though posters from more than eighty countries are included.



# “Pushing Back” Iran

By Reuel Marc Gerecht

On both the left and the right, there is a consensus in Washington that the United States needs to “push back” against the Islamic Republic’s nefarious actions in the Levant, Iraq, and Yemen. The clerical regime largely controls the ground war in Syria: Tehran’s foreign Shiite militias, imported from Lebanon, Iraq, Afghanistan, and Pakistan, and Iranian-directed native forces lead the battle against the Sunni insurrection. In Iraq, the Islamic Republic has energetically encouraged sectarian conflict, aiding politicians and militias that have taken a hardline toward political compromise with Sunnis. Iraqi members of Iran’s Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps have become senior officials in the government. And in Yemen, Iran has backed the Shiite Houthis in their campaign to dominate the country. What once would have seemed far-fetched—Tehran trying to develop a Lebanese Hezbollah-like movement among Yemen’s “Fiver” Zaydi Shiites, who have never been close to the “Twelver” Jafaris of Iran—is now conceivable. If such Shiite militancy becomes anchored in the south of the peninsula, Tehran will surely try to aim it northward toward the badly oppressed Shiites of Bahrain and the oil-rich Eastern Province of Saudi Arabia.

But among Republicans and Democrats, no one really wants to clarify what “push back” means. For cause: Any serious American effort against the Islamic Republic will inevitably risk the nuclear agreement, the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, which the Trump administration has signaled that it will, with increasing reluctance, keep but “rigorously” enforce. Within the Democratic Party, the atomic accord has become sacrosanct. Yet the two objectives cannot coexist. The sine qua non of the agreement is to trade temporary restraints on Iran’s nuclear aspirations for the lifting of sanctions against the Islamic Republic. Any serious American effort to punish Tehran will inevitably include the use of escalating sanctions. This is so even if the United States doesn’t deploy more forces into the region, which would mean, among other things, that the only unilateral way Washington could painfully hit Tehran would be through sanctions. Neither Congress nor the White House is going to confront the Islamic Republic and concurrently fuel its expansion. American foreign policy can sustain severe contradictions, but this one would be too much: We would be paying for our own defeat. If we imagine scenarios where the United States actually puts more troops into either Syria or Iraq (unlikely with President Trump), or just keeps troops in the latter against Iran’s wishes (not at all unlikely after the defeat of the Islamic State in Mosul), then we could rapidly find ourselves in an indirect shooting war with the mullahs’ praetorians, the Revolutionary Guards, who oversee all of Iran’s foreign adventures.

It’s impossible to imagine the White House or Congress maintaining the nuclear deal, with its economic rewards, while watching Iranian proxies kill American servicemen. If in response to more poison gas attacks against Syrian civilians, Donald Trump eventually decides to threaten the rule of Bashar al-Assad, it’s not unlikely that Tehran’s proxies would kill American forces operating in Iraq and Syria. Senior Iranian officials regularly use the term “asymmetrical” when referring to their strategy for responding to the reimposition of significant American sanctions or hostile military actions. “Asymmetrical” means the same thing to Iranians as it does to us: When Americans start dying, the JCPOA is dead.



Image credit: Poster Collection, US 3436, Hoover Institution Archives.

The restrained way that President Trump responded to Assad's use of sarin—cruise missiles at 3:40 a.m. after the Russians had been warned—doesn't suggest the White House really wants to escalate. Even more telling is Trump's recent decision to end the Central Intelligence Agency's "covert" support to the Free Syrian Army, which unlike the much more substantial US aid given to the mostly Kurdish Syrian Democratic Forces, battles the Assad regime and not the Islamic State. But Trump may not be able to roll back the clock. Aligning with Assad and his partners to eliminate Sunni jihadist organizations, as was the White House's initial hope, would be more challenging now. Moscow and Tehran will continue to slaughter Syrian civilians, further radicalizing the countryside. An explicit aim of the Assad regime—obviously approved, likely advanced, by both Tehran and Moscow—is to depopulate the rebellious Sunni regions of the country, redrawing the pre-war creedal map where the Alawis' 10 percent confronted a Sunni bloc of around 75 percent of the people. As Trump will learn, cease fires in Syria mean nothing or are counterproductive. It's only a matter of time before the regime makes a play to retake Deir az-Zor since its fall would fracture the Sunni opposition in eastern Syria, probably breaking the back of the rebellion. Both Moscow and Tehran would likely support this move, which would open the sought-after land route from Iran to Lebanon and clearly signal the eclipse of the United States in the Middle East.

For Washington an ethical slippery slope is in play: If the administration finds gas attacks to be beyond the pale, will it find vastly greater numbers of Syrian women and children slaughtered by Russian bombs, tanks, artillery, and Iranian-led ground forces to be sufficiently heinous to warrant real "push-back?" If Assad, Iran, and Russia are going to take advantage of their decisive victory in Aleppo last December, they are going to amp up their offensives in central and eastern Syria—regardless of any cease fires that Presidents Trump and Putin may have concluded. Barack Obama never indulged any moralism in his Syria policy, letting Assad and his partners slaughter without reprisal. However oddly, given his earlier endorsement of Assad's *guerre à outrance* against Sunni militancy, Trump opened the door to traditional American moralism when he responded to the sarin attack. However, his cancellation of C.I.A. support to the Free Syrian Army soldiers suggests that the earlier Trump may now be ascendant, that the president has no intention of changing his exclusive focus on the Islamic State regardless of what Assad and his allies do against the Syrian people.

Even if we imagine a new American foreign policy, where the administration is prepared to risk the nuclear deal to counter regionally the Islamic Republic (and also be prepared militarily to strike the nuclear facilities if the mullahs start reconnecting centrifuges), we still have to confront an ugly fact: Iran and Russia have become the dominant powers of the northern Middle East. What Obama gave away when he withdrew America from Mesopotamia in 2011 cannot be brought back—without a significant effort. The Russians have looked at the Middle East, from Turkey south to Egypt and from the Mediterranean to Afghanistan, and done the math. Shiites and Sunnis are nearly an even split. The Islamic Republic has never posed a strategic threat to Moscow. The clerical regime has never gained a foothold in the Caucasus and Central Asia outside of Tajikistan, the only Persian-speaking country in the former Soviet Union. And even in Tajikistan, where Sunni fundamentalism is strong, anti-Iranian sentiments are intense and widespread. After the fall of the Soviet Union, the Islamic Republic's cultural and religious outreach flopped, thwarted by the Sunni-Shiite divide (the vast majority of Central Asian Muslims are Sunni), Iranian cultural arrogance, and the superior efforts of Turkish Gülenists, Saudis, and other Sunni missionaries.

Putin has already made the calculation that his own brutal actions toward Sunni Muslims in the Caucasus and his support of anti-Islamist rulers within the former Soviet Union don't have a prohibitive downside. The Russian ruler does not seem to fear Sunni Islamic radicalism at home. Putin's alliance with Shiite Iran is a logical extension of his domestic self-confidence; it's also a smart strategic move since Iranian power has no effective Arab counterweight, at least in the northern Middle East.

The Trump administration's new default position in the region, which was where Hillary Clinton, too, was likely headed, is to view traditional Arab Sunni allies—the Sunni Gulf Arabs, Jordanians, and Egyptians—as a bulwark against Iran. Hunting for a means to avoid greater commitment in the Middle East, the White House and the Pentagon have also alighted upon the idea of the Kurds as our foot soldiers against radical Sunni Arabs. They aren't, of course. The Kurds have limited range and run the serious risk, in both Syria and Iraq,

of aggravating already inflamed ethnic tensions. And Sunni Arab states simply can't project the required power. In Egypt's case, the field marshal-turned-president-for-life, Abd al-Fattah al-Sissi, has more or less aligned himself with Assad, preferring dictatorial solidarity to Sunni fraternity. Only the Iranians have the ideological appeal, organization, and resources to send their own soldiers and thousands of foreigners into battle far from home. And the closer Moscow is to Tehran, the more the Arab states, particularly the oil-rich Gulfies, must treat Russia with all the deference that a great power commands. The White House's hope to separate Russia and Iran really makes neither strategic nor cultural sense since Russia and Iran want to see Washington's hard power diminished and fear the alluring soft power of American idealism.

Without a significant commitment of US troops to Syria and Iraq, there is simply no way for the United States to diminish Iran's influence on the ground. Establishing safe zones where Washington could build up Syrian Sunni forces capable of defeating radical Sunni organizations as well as the Alawite and foreign Shiite forces will require American combat forces. This would take time and considerable patience. When the American side starts winning (Syrian Sunni numbers do matter), which it inevitably will if Washington commits the necessary resources, more American soldiers will be required to supervise liberated territory. Whatever forces Jordan, the United Arab Emirates, or Saudi Arabia might commit to this "peace-keeping" effort, their contribution would surely fall far short of what is required.

If we concede the northern Middle East, which Trump appears to have already done, we can still contain Iran: As long as the US Navy guards the Persian Gulf, the Islamic Republic cannot manhandle the Arab Gulf states. Shiite insurrections in both Saudi Arabia and Bahrain would prove challenging for the Saudi and Khalifa families, but the Iranians probably can't spark and feed such rebellions without more reliable supply routes than they presently have. The weakest point for the Iranians—massive internal dissent, which last erupted in the 2009 Green Revolt that followed contested presidential elections—would be worthwhile for the administration to explore, but this isn't a natural card for President Trump to play. He would surely be awkward in aiming the bully pulpit in support of Muslims striving for democracy.

But the Middle East is, as always, fluid. The Iranians are quite capable of misjudging the United States. The clerical regime's capacity to provoke Washington should never be underestimated. And the American president is a work in progress. Trump obviously loathes the Islamic Republic and hates the nuclear deal and could conceivably walk away from it even though his administration doesn't seem to know yet what to do if the White House allows Congressional sanctions, lifted by the atomic accord, to reset. We could find ourselves in the odd and contradictory situation where Trump eagerly concedes victory to Iran in Syria and Iraq and allows the clerical regime to buy Boeing aircraft but ends the JCPOA, thus obliging Washington to prepare for possible military strikes, assuming Tehran has the fortitude to counter Trump. What seems unthinkable today may become conceivable tomorrow.



**REUEL MARC GERECHT** is a senior fellow with the Foundation for Defense of Democracies. He focuses on Iran, Iraq, Afghanistan, terrorism, and intelligence. He is the author of *The Wave: Man, God, and the Ballot Box in the Middle East* (2011), *Know Thine Enemy: A Spy's Journey into Revolutionary Iran* (1997), and *The Islamic Paradox: Shiite Clerics, Sunni Fundamentalists, and the Coming of Arab Democracy* (2004). He is a contributing editor for *The Weekly Standard* and has been a correspondent for *The Atlantic Monthly*, as well as a frequent contributor to the *Wall Street Journal*, the *New York Times*, and other publications. He was previously a resident fellow at the American Enterprise Institute and the director of the Middle East Initiative at the Project for the New American Century.



Image credit: Poster Collection, US 3425, Hoover Institution Archives.

## The Middle East: Terrorism Forever?

By Bing West

The short response is yes. Crime forever? Also, yes. Turbulence, terror, pestilence, famine, love, procreation, taxes, families, sunsets, rain, shine, etc.—all are components of the human condition. There is no arc toward perfection in human nature.

The jihadists will remain our mortal enemy; no negotiations or deterrence theories will alter their murderous intent. Unlike in the case of the Vietnam War, there is no strong, unified domestic political opposition to waging a low-level war against terrorists. The mainstream press acknowledges that the jihadists are abhorrent. We are at war against Islamist terrorists. As Secretary of Defense Jim Mattis has repeatedly said, the goal should be their annihilation.

Our martial resources for achieving that goal, however, should be modest, and no time horizon should be set. Promises or assurances pointing toward to a “political endgame” should be avoided. We should pace ourselves and run a steady course. Gradually, the jihadist disease within the Islam religion will run its course and be rejected or at least largely contained. That will take decades, given the despotic or chaotic nature of far too many Arab governments. In essence, our Mideast strategy is to remain a pivotal player, not to “win” the war against jihadist terrorists by maintaining a large military force and heavy diplomatic/political influence in Arab capitals, as we did in South Korea.

Our military strategy in Iraq and Syria appears sensible. We are shrewdly employing our relative advantages—extraordinary overhead surveillance, sound logistics, precision firepower, and experienced advisers and fire control teams. At the same time, we are largely avoiding American casualties.

Under President Obama, our diplomatic strategy focused upon reaching an accord—a *détente*—with Iran. Our traditional Sunni *de facto* allies—Jordan, Egypt, and the Gulf States—were spurned. Indeed, they were told to “share the neighborhood” with a Shiite Iranian theocracy intent upon regional sedition and upheaval. President Trump has pivoted back to our Sunni friends.

Granted, the political aftermath in Iraq will be messy. Iran is emerging with more influence than the United States, and the Sunnis in Iraq will continue to be mistreated. In Syria, the Assad regime will persist, and Russia and Iran will consolidate power inside the Assad/Alawite enclave. Gradually, all overt territorial holdings of the Islamic State—cities like Raqqa—will be seized. The Sunni eastern sector of Syria will be an impoverished, violence-wracked ward of some Arab and Kurdish martial coalition, aided in the background by the United States. The *de facto* Kurdistan, partially in Iraq and partially in Syria, will remain at odds with Turkey and Iraq. In none of these cases will America take the lead as the key decision-maker.

We can sustain interminable “skirmishing” in the Middle East due to geography and military prowess. Most of the countries consist of open terrain, deserts and plains devoid of vegetation. Most of the populations live in villages or urban centers, with vehicles essential for transportation. Our CIA has not been given the public credit it deserves for establishing vast networks of informers. Combining open terrain with information about the transit of terrorists ensures systematic destruction by our drones loitering overhead. Taking the

next step of bringing forward small artillery bases with our advisers and fire control teams several hundred meters behind the front lines has resulted in the gradual but inevitable destruction of the Islamic State in Mesopotamia. We should not extend this second step to other states like Yemen, Somalia, Chad, and Libya. However, we obviously should undertake air strikes and ground raids whenever our commanders perceive targets of opportunity.

Amongst all the boiling cauldrons in the Middle East, remote and medieval Afghanistan presents the most vexing challenge. Our goal is not to permit an overt terrorist sanctuary or safe haven. That is an elastic concept. Put bluntly, our baseline objective is not to permit the Taliban to seize major cities or to drive us from Kabul, as we were driven from the roof of our embassy in Saigon in 1975. Unlike in Mesopotamia, the terrain works against us. The vast mountain ranges and the “Green Zone” along the major rivers provide shelter for the hardy Taliban who walk and hide in small groups to coordinate attacks.

The challenge we face is complex. Afghans have a scant concept of nationalism. Tribal identity is pervasive, with the Pashtuns comprising the Taliban core and with most Afghan soldiers belonging to other tribes. The central government lacks cohesion, with no charismatic leaders. The opium/heroin trade provides half of GDP, with corruption affecting all levels from the farmer to the ministries in Kabul. Pakistan is determined to continue with its policy of providing the Taliban both shelter and aid. President Trump, as our commander in chief, has made clear his impatience and exasperation with this civil war that sputters on and on.

The Taliban are so inextricably entangled with other Islamists that a political compromise seems no more possible than it was with the North Vietnamese during the Nixon/Kissinger years. Under current conditions, a political settlement would be a fig leaf, unlikely to provide even a “decent interval” before a bloody and total collapse. Thus it is likely we will commit several thousand more troops, using roughly the model now employed in Iraq and Syria. It will not, due to the terrain and other factors mentioned above, be as effective.

America’s major challenge is not with violence and terrorism in the Middle East. Conditions there are not critical to our future. Some problems you don’t solve. You mitigate them and apply resources and strategies to avoid catastrophe.



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Image credit: Poster Collection, US 3442, Hoover Institution Archives.

## Beyond the Terror War

By Thomas Donnelly

Since the decline of the Ottoman Empire, the story of the Middle East has been one of inconclusive struggles of the weak against the weak. That the Ottomans lasted as long as they did is in substantial measure a testament to the constant chaos of Arab and Persian politics. Generations of post-colonial nationalists have been entirely unable to create states capable of competing with modern European or East Asian powers; their inability to master the craft of large-scale conventional warfare is written in the history of Israel and the Iran-Iraq war of the 1980s.

Moreover, since the twelfth century days of Hassan-i Sabbah, the peoples of the region have been grandmasters of the arts of assassination, raiding, and other forms of irregular warfare. The “hashshashin” struck terror into the hearts of Christian Crusader and Seljuk Turk alike. The Islamic State—in the process of

morphing back to a network after its heady years as a “caliphate”—and al-Qaeda simply are carrying on a hoary regional tradition.

Terror now, terror tomorrow, terror forever? Almost certainly.

Nonetheless, the collapse of the Islamic State in western Iraq and eastern Syria ought to pull away the shroud of post-9/11 confusion that has occluded the strategic vision of the United States and the West in general. By abstracting out a “war on terror” from the larger struggle for regional power, we have paralyzed ourselves into a kind of short-range target fixation. We’re violating Clausewitz’s first dictum: to understand the nature of the conflict.

The news from Raqqa, Mosul, and the borderlands between them offer increasingly vivid glimpses of this evolving regional struggle. As ISIS recedes, Russian, Iranian, Kurdish, Turkish, and American forces and proxies begin to face off. We’ve shot down Syrian strike fighters and Iranian drones. The Iranians launched a salvo of ballistic missiles over Iraq into Syria. The Russians have declared any coalition aircraft they spot flying west of the Euphrates River will be regarded as hostile. Things have gotten so tense that the Australians—along with the British, our most steadfast battle-buddies since 9/11—have decided to suspend their participation in the Syria air campaign. After ISIS, eastern Syria and western Iraq won’t remain a vacuum or return to any kind of status quo. The landgrab has already started, and he who can seize and hold terrain—demonstrate enough conventional force and staying power—will emerge the winner.

This contest, too, is very much a struggle of the weak against the weak. In Damascus, the Assad regime has held on to power by the skin of its teeth; without Russian and Iranian help, they’d be lucky to be alive, let alone looking to project power into eastern Syria. Vladimir Putin has sent but thirtyw airplanes and perhaps five thousand troops into the fight; as always, he’s played his hand boldly, but the value of his cards is limited. Iran, whose dreams of restored greatness and hegemony are the principal driver of the larger regional conflict, is strained by multifront efforts. In the process, its best troops—the Quds Force or Hezbollah, for example—have suffered significant losses. Tehran finds itself caught in a transition, too: the mix of terrorists,



guerillas, militias, and missiles that it has perfected for the last several decades is poorly organized, trained, equipped, or otherwise suited to the current moment, and the military investments and reforms that might be enabled in the wake of the Obama-era nuclear deal have yet to be accomplished. Hence the importance of Putin's Legion; he's seized the moment not only to reassert Russian strength against the United States, but to impress the local powers as well.

The Saudis are also clearly preparing themselves to take a larger role. Fearful of Iran, spooked by unforeseen changes in international energy markets and—Donald Trump's orb-rubbing moment aside—uncertain of American commitment, Riyadh is throwing its traditional caution to the wind. The elevation of Mohammed bin Salman to crown prince may end the sclerosis of Saudi domestic politics, but it also reflects a hardening of the strategic heart; as defense minister, "MBS" has been the architect of the brutal campaign in Yemen.

The attacks of September 11, 2001 caught America unprepared—not only to combat the reach of modern terror groups, but also to understand the historical political goal that motivated them: the reordering of the House of Islam, particularly in its Arab heartland. The divide between al-Qaeda and ISIS is one of ways and means, not ends, and it seems likely that ISIS will not only survive but continue to prosper as a terrorist organization, a virtual rather than physical caliphate.

The temptation, post-Raqqah, post-Mosul, to declare "mission accomplished" will be no less powerful for Americans now than it was in 1991, 2003, or 2011. It's not just the terror war that will continue but a much larger and more important conflict for which we remain unprepared. Even beyond the tactical, operational, and strategic challenges the Middle East war presents, it begs for domestic political leadership.



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## Discussion Questions

1. Did the so-called Iran Deal decrease Iranian-sponsored terrorism?
2. Will the new collaboration between Israel, the Gulf States, and moderate Arab autocracies redefine the so-called war against terrorism?
3. Is there any chance that Iraq, Libya, or Syria will ever again become stable states within their old borders?
4. Is the American doctrine of preemption, democracy promotion, and nation building in the Middle East dead?

### POLL: What is the future of Islamist terrorist attacks in Europe and the West in general?

- Terrorism is the inevitable prelude to an existential and global violent clash of civilizations.
- An impotent West should get used to far greater domestic terrorism as the unstoppable threat expands and spreads.
- The present level of terrorism will level off but become an unfortunate and permanent part of Western life.
- Increased vigilance and changes in immigration policy and surveillance will radically decrease incidents of terrorism.
- Increased counterterrorism at home and preemptive operations in the Middle East will end for good these attacks.

## Suggestions for Further Reading

- Jennifer Cafarella, Frederick W. Kagan, and Kimberly Kagan, "America's Way Ahead in Syria," *U.S. Grand Strategy: Destroying ISIS and Al-Qaeda, Report Four* (Washington, DC: American Enterprise Institute and The Institute for the Study of War, March 14, 2017). <https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/americas-way-ahead-in-syria>
- Constance Arminjon Hachem, *Chiisme et État: Les clercs à l'épreuve de la modernité*. (CNRS Éditions, 2013). <http://www.cnrseditions.fr/science-politique/6738-chiisme-et-etat-constance-arminjon-hachem.html>
- Misagh Parsa, *Democracy in Iran: Why It Failed and How It Might Succeed* (Harvard University Press, 2016). <http://www.hup.harvard.edu/catalog.php?isbn=9780674545045>
- Laura Secor, *Children of Paradise: The Struggle for the Soul of Iran* (Riverhead Books, 2016). <http://www.penguinrandomhouse.com/books/308446/children-of-paradise-by-laura-secor/9780399573347/>



IN THE NEXT ISSUE:

Preemptive Strikes and Preventive Wars

## Military History in Contemporary Conflict

As the very name of Hoover Institution attests, military history lies at the very core of our dedication to the study of “War, Revolution, and Peace.” Indeed, the precise mission statement of the Hoover Institution includes the following promise: “The overall mission of this Institution is, from its records, to recall the voice of experience against the making of war, and by the study of these records and their publication, to recall man’s endeavors to make and preserve peace, and to sustain for America the safeguards of the American way of life.” From its origins as a library and archive, the Hoover Institution has evolved into one of the foremost research centers in the world for policy formation and pragmatic analysis. It is with this tradition in mind, that the “Working Group on the Role of Military History in Contemporary Conflict” has set its agenda—reaffirming the Hoover Institution’s dedication to historical research in light of contemporary challenges, and in particular, reinvigorating the national study of military history as an asset to foster and enhance our national security. By bringing together a diverse group of distinguished military historians, security analysts, and military veterans and practitioners, the working group seeks to examine the conflicts of the past as critical lessons for the present.

## Working Group on the Role of Military History in Contemporary Conflict

The Working Group on the Role of Military History in Contemporary Conflict examines how knowledge of past military operations can influence contemporary public policy decisions concerning current conflicts. The careful study of military history offers a way of analyzing modern war and peace that is often underappreciated in this age of technological determinism. Yet the result leads to a more in-depth and dispassionate understanding of contemporary wars, one that explains how particular military successes and failures of the past can be often germane, sometimes misunderstood, or occasionally irrelevant in the context of the present.

## Strategika

*Strategika* is a journal that analyzes ongoing issues of national security in light of conflicts of the past—the efforts of the Military History Working Group of historians, analysts, and military personnel focusing on military history and contemporary conflict. Our board of scholars shares no ideological consensus other than a general acknowledgment that human nature is largely unchanging. Consequently, the study of past wars can offer us tragic guidance about present conflicts—a preferable approach to the more popular therapeutic assumption that contemporary efforts to ensure the perfectibility of mankind eventually will lead to eternal peace. New technologies, methodologies, and protocols come and go; the larger tactical and strategic assumptions that guide them remain mostly the same—a fact discernable only through the study of history.



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