“U.S. Power and Influence in the Middle East: Part Two”

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FEATURING

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Jon Alterman: Three years into the Iraq war, the United States looked like it was losing its grip on the country. By late 2006, a growing chorus of U.S citizens felt like the war was a lost cause, and a large chunk of the Pentagon agreed with them. According to media reports at the time, U.S. military leaders thought the United States should be stepping away from conducting its own combat operations. Instead, it should focus on supporting Iraqi operations, while working to promote economic reconstruction and political reconciliation. But in January 2007, the Bush administration decided it wasn’t going replace its troops with more diplomats and police trainers. Instead, it would respond with a significant scaling-up of U.S. military forces—the surge.

President Bush: “This is a strong commitment. But for it to succeed, our commanders say the Iraqis will need our help. So, America will change our strategy to help the Iraqis carry out their campaign to put down sectarian violence and bring security to the people of Baghdad. This will require increasing American force levels, so I’ve committed more than 20,000 additional American troops to Iraq.”

Jon Alterman: Within months, there were 30,000 more U.S. troops in Iraq, bringing the total number at its height to 168,000. The troop surge stabilized the security situation, and by September, military leaders were touting its success.

David Petraeus: “As a bottom line up front, the military objectives of the surge are in large measure being met.

Jon Alterman: But the surge did not solve Iraq’s problems. Iraqis remained divided, and the political situation stagnated. Although U.S. troop levels dropped from their peak during the surge, the U.S military remained mired in Iraq for years, facing new challenges and changing to meet them.

Jon Alterman: Welcome to the U.S. in the Middle East podcast miniseries. In this series, we talk to leading experts and former policymakers about the role of U.S. power and influence in the Middle East. I’m your host, Dr. Jon Alterman, Senior Vice President, Zbigniew Brzezinski Chair in Global Security and Geostrategy, and director of the Middle East Program at the Center for Strategic and International Studies in Washington, DC.

In this episode, we will trace the story of the last 20 years of heavy U.S. military involvement in the Middle East, identifying lessons learned by U.S. forces, partners, and adversaries after two decades of heightened engagement in the region.

Eliot Cohen: I always told military friends of mine, “when Hurricane Katrina hits, the mayor of New Orleans doesn’t call Foggy Bottom and say ‘we’ve just had this catastrophe hit the city, please send me four ambassadors and a bunch of junior diplomats.’”
Jon Alterman: That’s Eliot Cohen. He told me he spent his career “in one way or the other hanging around with the U.S. military,” but, in 2007, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice asked him to serve as her counselor. He argues that the success of the surge was a result of the U.S. military doing what militaries do.

Eliot Cohen: I came to the State Department when the decision was underway, although I’d been involved in some of the discussions—including with the president—over the previous six months.

Part of the key to the success of the surge was less the civic action stuff than the sheer military presence isolating the population. It’s a very classic kind of doctrine.

Jon Alterman: Kori Schake served on the National Security Council during President Bush’s first term and was the deputy director of policy planning at the State Department in his second term, teaching at West Point in between. She has a slightly different take.

Kori Schake: When there’s a hurricane, you don’t just send the National Guard. The governors are integrally involved. You surge social welfare involvement. You provide economic assistance. You think about what we are going to do about evacuating people. It’s not just the National Guard that does evacuations. Civil society does it as well. Fire departments do it. Police forces do it. If you think about how to get schools open again, we don’t have the National Guard figuring out all those problems.

Jon Alterman: General Joseph Votel spent nearly four decades in the U.S. military and most recently served as the commander of the U.S. Central Command from 2016 to 2019. He says that policymakers often turned to the military to address problems in the Middle East.

Joseph Votel: I think a part of it was delivering results. We were getting things done. You could see definitive progress through a military lens.

Jon Alterman: And the military did deliver results.

Eliot Cohen: In general, our experience over the last 20 years is that, with particularly elite units of different kinds, we can achieve tactical successes. The problem is that they’re always limited—and in some cases undone—by the broader political context in which you have to operate.

Jon Alterman: Kori Schake says that despite the surge’s seeming success, the military sometimes felt that it was fighting a war on its own.

Kori Schake: In both Iraq and Afghanistan, we were supposed to have whole of government strategies and we surged our military forces without surging our diplomatic, intelligence, foreign assistance, and civil society efforts. That is what has led many people—both in the military and outside it—to say with despair, “we’re not a country at war. We’re just a military at war,” and that we don’t care
enough to actually create strategies that have integral and mutually supporting elements. We just throw military force at the problem.

Jon Alterman: Part of the reason behind the perception that the United States “just throws military force at the problem,” has to do with the way the civilian side of the U.S. government works. In Iraq and Afghanistan, the United States created joint cells that brought together soldiers, diplomats, agriculture and development experts, legal experts, and other civilians to improve local governance. They called them “provincial reconstruction teams.” General Votel recalls the idea working better in theory than in practice.

Joseph Votel: The provincial reconstruction teams were a good concept. Yet we were unable to sustain that over the long haul. Involvement was voluntary for the diplomatic corps and other inter-agency partners. The military is not something that was voluntary, and we were able to sustain that involvement over time. When you don’t have that, then we propense to use military to fill in those gaps.

Jon Alterman: The military also had scale on its side.

Kori Schake: A $740 billion-a-year defense budget goes pretty far, alongside a workforce of a 1,200,000 in the active duty, with another million or so in the National Guard and reserves. Compare that to the size of the Treasury Department’s international staff or even the size of the U.S. diplomatic corps.

Jon Alterman: I will compare. The United States has fewer than 14,000 Foreign Service officers worldwide. That’s a ratio of 85 soldiers for every diplomat, even if you leave the National Guard and reserves out of the equation. On the one hand, the sheer size of the U.S. military made them an easy tool for policymakers to turn to.

On the other, some think that politicians tried to hide behind the military. They used the military to avoid making hard choices about what they really cared about.

Kori Schake: Political leaders in the United States use military deployments as a proxy for political will—in a way we have done in the Middle East particularly for the last several years. Deployments of Patriot missile batteries to Gulf states, for example, serve as an unconvincing proxy for our willingness to use military force to protect our interests and the interests of our friends.

Jon Alterman: Despite policymakers’ tendency to use the military in the Middle East to solve political problems back home, the United States never set out to fight for 20 years in the Middle East. Nevertheless, doing so has had a profound impact on military operations. One of those impacts was on the military’s willingness to engage broadly in its fight against terrorist networks.

Joseph Votel: The whole idea of having a network-on-a-network and thinking about your partners and getting them involved has been a very helpful thing for us. I think
that was an inherent strength of the special operations community that has now been embraced much more broadly.

Jon Alterman: It also strained it. According to Schake, the volunteer military was simply not designed for 20 years of conflict.

Kori Schake: It was designed for short, sharp engagements. Yet, I think the most enduring legacy of 20 years of warfare in Iraq and Afghanistan is how amazingly well the all-volunteer force held up for a type of war it wasn’t designed for.

Jon Alterman: As the military exits 20 years of conflict in the Middle East, its attention is shifting elsewhere. The public summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy—the Department of Defense’s strategic guidelines—doesn’t call for abandoning the Middle East, but it firmly establishes renewed Great Power competition with Russia and China as the premier challenge for the United States.

Jim Mattis: “But in our new defense strategy, Great Power competition, not terrorism, is now the primary focus of U.S. national security.”

Jon Alterman: The shift toward Great Power competition is drawing U.S. resources and attention away from the Middle East, limiting what the United States can commit to the region. The nature and location of security challenges are also shifting. This means that, in many ways, large force deployments in the Middle East just don’t make sense to policymakers anymore.

President Biden: “With the terror threat now in many places, keeping thousands of troops grounded and concentrated in just one country at a cost of billions each year makes little sense to me.”

Jon Alterman: That’s causing the United States to rethink how it engages with the Middle East. The National Defense Strategy highlights the crucial role that partners and allies will play in advancing U.S. strategic goals. As the United States disengages, partners will have to take on more responsibility.

Joseph Votel: Where I think American leadership really plays a role is in promoting more of a regional cooperative effort in some of these areas, whether it’s counter terrorism, maritime security, or integrated air missile defense. I think the Abraham Accords really provide an opportunity to do this.

Jon Alterman: Schake agrees.

Kori Schake: The Trump administration deserves a lot of credit for getting most of the Gulf states and Israel into visible political alignment for a common threat. Establishing red lines and being willing to enforce them also matters. It is also a demonstration of political commitment to outcomes that you want to see.

Jon Alterman: But U.S. support won’t come as a blank check.
Joseph Votel: We have to be willing to provide capabilities for our partners, but we also have to have very frank discussions with them about the capabilities that they require and can sustain long-term. Then, with the provision of capabilities, I think getting them to a level of capability where they can reliably operate and have confidence in their own capabilities is really important.

Kori Schake: It is partly our own fault because we so constantly talk about our superior abilities, our military excellence, and the amount of our spending. We trivialize all those things on their part when, in fact, most of the United States’ allies have the strength to fight and win their wars–largely without our assistance.

Jon Alterman: U.S. allies and adversaries alike will need to adapt.

Eliot Cohen: In some ways, they already learned those lessons back in 1991, which are: don’t do anything that’s really big and provocative because the Americans may actually spin themselves up and drop the heavy hammer on you. Do what you can do ambiguously and do it through semi-covert warfare, surrogates, and low levels of violence and things of that nature, and the United States will eventually go away. I think that’s what the locals have learned. I think that includes what our allies have learned too.

Jon Alterman: Adversaries outside the region have also closely watched the United States’ example. They will want to avoid the commitments that kept the United States involved in the Middle East for two decades.

Joseph Votel: What I don’t foresee is actors like China or Russia stepping into places like Afghanistan and trying to replace a footprint that we had there. I think everybody has learned lessons from that, and I don’t think anybody will be eager to do that.

Jon Alterman: The U.S. military has also learned from the experience. Decades of military activity in the Middle East left military leaders frustrated and with an urgent desire to pull out of the area. Eliot Cohen says that, from the military’s perspective, 20 years of intense engagement created:

Eliot Cohen: A hearty disgust with the Middle East and a desire to get away from it. They view the experiences of the Middle East as having been not futile but a tremendous drain on resources and energy. Like the U.S. public, they’re willing to turn in a different direction.

Jon Alterman: Kori Schake agrees. She says the U.S. military wants to reimagine its role in the region.

Kori Schake: They will want to stop doing almost everything in the Middle East. They will want to stop having to prop up allied war efforts that are unsuccessful and—in some cases morally dubious in their conduct—by countries friendly to the United States that are advancing U.S. interests. Of course, the alternative is doing it yourself, which they also don’t want to do—and which political leaders want to do even less.
Jon Alterman: Although the major deployments are over, U.S. interests in the region have not disappeared and military activity may continue for years.

Joseph Votel: I think we’re going to have to deal with terrorism. What we have learned about terrorist organizations is that they continue to morph, change, and adapt. We should expect that as we move forward. We are going to have to continue to protect our interests in the region, even though we may not want to. We want to focus in other areas. This is something that’s going to constantly pull us back to the area.

Jon Alterman: According to Cohen, no matter how badly the military might want to get out of the Middle East, the region won’t allow the United States to leave so easily.

Eliot Cohen: I’ve always believed in a variant of Trotsky’s favorite dictum that, “you may not be interested in the dialectic, but the dialectic is interested in you.” The version in this case is, “you may not be interested in the Middle East, but the Middle East is interested in you.” I think we’re all aware that, one way or another, the Middle East has the potential to drag us back in.

Jon Alterman: The U.S. military’s failures in the Middle East won’t disappear with the U.S. drawdown in the area.

Eliot Cohen: The issue will be more broadly how we tackle counterinsurgency—if you want to call it that. Unfortunately, I think the tendency will be to say, “let’s just put this thing behind us. Let’s focus on the challenges of the future and assume that we’ll never do this again.” Of course, that’s exactly what we said after Vietnam. Then, we found ourselves once again waging counterinsurgency warfare and had to make it up on the fly. As a result, we were quite poorly prepared for the challenges that we faced in Iraq and Afghanistan. Unfortunately, I think the institutional instinct to forget all that will be pretty overwhelming.

Jon Alterman: In Cohen’s view, Vietnam scarred the U.S. military for half a century,

Eliot Cohen: The way they dealt with that was by saying, "well, we’ll never do that kind of thing again. We will define war as the kind of thing that we feel very comfortable doing" That definition is large units maneuvering in spaces where there aren’t civilians, by and large, to get in the way. That’s why we like to train in deserts. We like to wage really big wars with really neat, clean endings.

Jon Alterman: Instead, the U.S. military found itself embroiled in messy wars that lasted more than a decade with difficult allies, myriad militias, and politicians whose intentions were often murky. Kori Schake notes that militaries have never been able to remove themselves from the messy realities of politics—despite how much they may want to.

Kori Schake: They’re imagining a past that doesn’t exist and are hesitant to engage in the messy political swamp of affecting how governments and societies choose to behave. I don’t think that’s a stable, long-term equilibrium because the kinds
of threats that continue to bedevil us are emerging from within societies and they are challenges of failed governance.

Jon Alterman: The United States in general, and the U.S. military in particular, learned a lot from two decades of war in the Middle East—chiefly the limits of relying too much on the military.

Joseph Votel: The final impact is an appreciation for the limited value of the military in terms of what it can accomplish. I don’t mean that it cannot do things; it certainly can. But the decisive aspects of resolving the political situations and bringing final and lasting solutions are rarely, if ever, going to be handled through a military approach. I think we’ve learned that in spates over the last 20 years and we'll continue to see that going forward.

Jon Alterman: Those lessons have affected how policymakers view the U.S. military and how willing they are to try and use it to achieve larger political goals abroad.

Kori Schake: I think in the near term, U.S. presidents will be hesitant to engage in the ambitious undertaking of trying to reshape other societies.

Jon Alterman: The last 20 years have shown policymakers and the U.S. military the limits of using power in the Middle East. Over-reliance on U.S. forces in the Middle East frustrated the military and it failed to bring lasting solutions to the political challenges plaguing the United States in the region. Policymakers pushed the U.S. military into roles it had no intention of filling—and no capacity to fill. Along the way, they changed the U.S. military and the way that the United States engages in the region.

Next time on the podcast, we look at the United States’ economic toolkit in the Middle East and how successful development aid and sanctions have been to address U.S. interests in the region. This is the United States in the Middle East podcast miniseries.

I’m your host, Dr. Jon Alterman. Thank you for listening. If you enjoyed this episode, please like and comment on the podcast. To make sure you don’t miss any episodes, you can subscribe to Babel on iTunes or Spotify or wherever you listen to podcasts.