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## In the Mideast, America Casts an Imperial Shadow

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By Rashid Khalidi  
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Most Americans think that our role as a world power began with World War II, the "good war," and then continued with the similarly noble Cold War. We like to think that the United States acts in the world exclusively in the name of ideals such as freedom and democracy.

So it may come as a bit of a shock to learn that the United States has had an uninterrupted military presence in the [Middle East](#) for 65 years, dating to 1942. Most Americans would also bristle at the idea that this presence, from the arrival of GIs in [North Africa](#) onward, has essentially become a continuation of nearly a century and a half of European military adventures in the region. But history shows a disturbing continuity between what the European colonial powers did in the Middle East, starting with Napoleon's invasion of [Egypt](#) in 1798, and what the United States is now doing in [Iraq](#) and elsewhere. Indeed, the United States has managed in a few short years to do more damage in the region than did the hated colonial powers that were finally driven out only a few decades ago.

Of course, the European powers did not stint in their use of force in the Middle East. As Juan Cole of the [University of Michigan](#) has shown, Napoleon's troops savagely repressed Egyptian resistance even while the French proclaimed the ideals of their Revolution. Aerial bombing of civilians was pioneered by the Italians in [Libya](#) in 1911, perfected by the British in Iraq in 1920 and used by the French in 1925 to level whole quarters of Syrian cities. Home demolitions, collective punishment, summary execution, detention without trial, routine torture -- these were the weapons of [Europe's](#) takeover.

But [Britain](#) and [France](#) understood that naked power was not enough to achieve lasting imperial control. They learned that they also needed expertise, a knowledge of local languages and culture, and some form of indirect rule that eventually removed their military forces from direct contact with the local population. And although they faced decades of stubborn resistance in an arc running from [Morocco](#) to [Iran](#), they managed to hold onto the reins until World War II shattered their economies and unleashed the changes that brought independence to all these countries.

During the Cold War, neither superpower crossed a red line by deploying large numbers of troops or by occupying parts of the region outright -- until [the Kremlin](#) made the fatal, foolish mistake of invading [Afghanistan](#) in 1979. That was the beginning of the end of the [Soviet Union](#), and of the Cold War era.

But since 2000, no one in a position of power in Washington seems to have bothered to read any history. Believing that the demise of the Soviet Union meant an end to checks and balances at home and to limits abroad, and seduced by the blandishments of shallow-minded theorists who believe that the rules that applied to all previous great powers do not apply to the United States, the current administration has plunged into not one but two land wars in [Asia](#).

Once upon a time, after Korea and [Vietnam](#), the words "land war in Asia" might have inspired caution in Washington. But slaying the "Vietnam Syndrome" that limited the executive branch's power to act abroad was an uncontrollable obsession for the clique that has surrounded several presidents since [Richard M. Nixon](#), including such notables as [Dick Cheney](#) and [Donald Rumsfeld](#). These were men who, by and large, had never seen combat, knew little of war and scorned history, geography and expertise based on personal experience. Some of them were probably unaware that Iraq was in Asia, and

would not have cared if they knew.

Thus armed with the conviction that theirs were the noblest of purposes and buoyed by the popular support that a president always receives after an attack (particularly one as dastardly as 9/11), [President Bush](#) and his advisers ignored 200 years of Middle Eastern history and invaded Iraq, supposedly to spread democracy to the entire region.

As a general rule, democracy does not grow out of the barrel of a gun. Moreover, few prologues are as unpropitious for the establishment of democracy as war, invasion and occupation. Apologists for the Iraq invasion have suggested ahistoric parallels between Iraq and postwar [Japan](#) and [Germany](#), ignoring the fact that the latter had been two of the world's most highly developed industrial powers, with large middle classes and established, generations-old traditions of parliamentary government before they gave way to dictatorship in the 1930s.

We are told that Iraq is a recently created, artificial state; and it is, like scores of other states that colonialism carved across three continents. One would think that that would be all the more reason to keep in place the institutions that held Iraq together, but the arrogance of those in charge of [the Pentagon](#) and in [Baghdad](#) was as limitless as their ignorance, and they swept away the entire Iraqi governmental structure, putting in its place an overstretched American army of occupation to control a vast, devastated country of more than 25 million people with a history of resistance to foreign control.

After the first shock of the invasion wore off, what people in Iraq and all over the Middle East remembered was two centuries of Western powers attempting to bring their countries under imperial control through military force. They recalled decades of Western petroleum companies controlling their oil. And unsurprisingly, the United States quickly became as unpopular as the European colonial powers had ever been.

Iraq has changed everything. In Washington, a city obsessed with the present, it was easy to forget that as recently as a few years ago, the United States was not particularly disliked in the Middle East and that [al-Qaeda](#) was a tiny underground organization with almost no popular support. It was equally easy to forget that in the last phases of the Cold War, the United States had managed to protect its interests in the Middle East with no land forces on the ground, through an over-the-horizon presence.

Today, [al-Qaeda in Iraq](#) threatens the security of entire districts of the country; policymakers hint at a "South Korean" model of an indefinite [U.S. military](#) presence in Iraq; the Pentagon is weighing long-term plans for U.S. bases all over the region; and Washington seems to assume that U.S. national interests require our troops to fight their way across West Asia and North Africa to stop "the terrorists," failing which we will find them crawling up the beaches of [Miami](#) and [Long Island](#).

This is madness. People in the Middle East are angry at the United States not because of our values, many of which they share: democracy, free enterprise, even many of our cultural values such as love of family and respect for religion. They are angry at us, essentially, because our forces are doing things in their back yard that we would never tolerate from foreign troops in our own region.

We are the greatest power in world history. But that will make not a whit of difference to the outcome in Iraq. We will not -- we cannot -- force the Iraqis to do what we want, any more than the British could toward the end of their own attempt to rule Iraq, although they managed to hold on for much longer than our doomed occupation will.

Our political leaders must recognize that force does not solve the problem of terrorism. The real

terrorists -- those blowing up civilians in marketplaces and office towers, as opposed to Iraqis resisting U.S. occupation -- can be dealt with only by means far more subtle than military might. Dealing effectively with this elusive enemy requires patience and a far more precise, carefully targeted and politically sophisticated toolkit than the mighty bludgeon of the U.S. armed forces.

No true U.S. interest has been served by the invasion, destruction and occupation of Iraq. We have done incalculable harm to that tragic country and to our position in the world. Perhaps we can limit the damage if we substitute a little humility for the blind hubris that led us into this disaster -- an understanding of the limitations of armed force and "a decent respect to the opinions of mankind," especially those whose hearts we hope to win.

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