

The US Military and the Middle East

William J. Fallon

The United States presence, purpose, and engagement in the Middle East are in keeping with American national aspirations. One unique phenomenon in that US Central Command has responsibility for the entire region except Israel, which is still under European Command. Nonetheless, the goal for both major commands is to work with other national agencies and with US partners, allies, and colleagues in the region to try to promote stability and security. The bottom line is that this has not changed in years.

In terms of forces, the US obviously still has very large ground forces in Iraq and Afghanistan. We tend to think of them as in this region because they all work through US Central Command, even though in fact some are a little beyond the Middle East. People tend to forget that there are also very large maritime and air forces in this region and that they are present all the time. They may not be visible to people in each country but they are very close by, and are engaged in the process of trying to extend stability and security while supporting US operations in Iraq and Afghanistan. That will most likely continue.

Because of US military engagement in land combat, it may not have been able to exercise as much influence as we might care to with our friends and partners in the region. The number of ground forces will certainly decrease in Iraq, which will allow the US to expand its involvement elsewhere to a greater degree and enhance what we have been trying to build. An example of that would be Lebanon, where the US military was not engaged for decades and is now trying to work with the LAF and the government of Lebanon to gain some influence and be able to help them cope with the problems they are facing.

A few observations are relevant to US and Israeli activities and security in this region. What have been highlighted, of course, are the problems: there are many problems, and I suspect there will always be problems in this world. However we have been dealing with problems for a long time, and not only can people deal with them, but in the particular case of Israel and the United States both countries are well equipped to deal with problems – security and otherwise. While challenges often seem intractable, so daunting, so longstanding, and so vicious that we are unable to deal with them, I do not accept that approach.

Another major theme is change: things are constantly changing, and one of the challenges that we have difficulty understanding is the extent to which things change and the opportunities that change offers. In Iraq, for example, the situation has morphed many times since 2003 and is dramatically different today than it was a year ago, two years ago, and so on. The ability of people in the US and in other places to understand this is highly suspect, because these are difficult issues to grasp. The lack of first hand knowledge means that most people have to rely on others for information. When people pass down stories through multiple narrators there is always a difference. Therefore, in dealing with change, we have to recognize that we also often subscribe to a lot of mythology.

We tend to believe things as correct, true, and accurate assessments, while someone on the outside, who is more objective, would probably think otherwise. We have to deal with perceptions and recognize them as a major challenge. One of the challenges today, in security as well as in other matters, is the reality of perceptions and how they come about. Dealing with this issue requires a host of tools that include many things in addition to the standard military force capabilities. In this business of perceptions there is another change that is taking place. This change relates to the idea of security, which seems to have been defined better in the past. It used to be “Them” and “Us,” and there was usually a boundary or a border so it was pretty easy, or so it seemed, to identify the enemy or the problem. However, today security is much closer to home.

In Israel, much like the US, some of the larger security issues are internal. These include the personal economic challenges that we are facing today. Some of the very difficult issues, such as the Iranian and the Palestinian issues, should be addressed in a comprehensive manner. These

are complex issues with deep roots, and they are not going to be solved by some quick, easy solution.

I detect a high degree of anxiety in Israel. However, I would encourage the country to rise above this because Israel has a lot going for it that can form the foundation to overcome the security problems: the spirit of the people who founded this country; the vitality; the diversity of people from all over the world coming together; the indisputable capability of the IDF that has been tested many times; economic vitality; political diversity; and more. All these are essential attributes in dealing with problems successfully. On top of that, Israel has a close relationship with the US, particularly in security matters. The priority here recently has been to point to Iran as the top security issue. I think that getting to work on the issue closer to home, the Palestinians, should be the priority.

I think that people in Israel, as well as the Palestinians, are generally of the same mind. People of all walks want the same things in life. Those on both sides of the dispute here have basic economic and security needs. Using its far superior capabilities, it is about time that Israel addressed some of these problems. There are going to be some “bad” actors that might be impossible to deal with. There are going to be extremists. The US found some extremists in Iraq, “the irreconcilables,” as General David Petraeus has called them. No matter what you do, they are not going to come on board. Fair enough, you, as we, will have to get rid of them and then work with those willing to cooperate.

The fact that most people want the same things creates an opportunity. Obviously Israel will have different objectives than the US, because the US thinks at a global level and Israel is more focused on this region. But the US is very interested in the Middle East and has made great progress in Iraq. This has huge implications for Iran.

The best way to approach security issues, or any other issues that involve people beyond one’s own borders, it is to get your act together at home. The basic units of operating forces, companies of troops, platoons, individual ships, and aircraft squadrons, should be composed of and staffed by people who are confident in their abilities and professionally excellent. Their commanders should have high confidence in their ability to execute whatever the mission is, however challenging, and the troops themselves should feel good about themselves, have confidence in their leadership,

and know they have the training, tools, and equipment to do the job. As we look at the challenges around the world, the first order of business is to get squared away at home politically, economically, and militarily. And from that position of strength, given all the other attributes, the rest should be perhaps not easy, but certainly doable.

Regarding US military assistance to Israel: when I was the commander in the Pacific, I had to contend with major strategic issues for the United States, and I thought about the forty-three countries in the Asia-Pacific region that I had to engage. I looked at the array of capabilities, and realized that the US certainly had a strong military. A lot of our naval and airpower was there and we had many troops in the area, but there were also aspects that had to be brought to bear if we were going to be successful in civilian security, including foreign military assistance. The United States Congress has been generous enough, on behalf of the taxpayers, to give foreign military assistance to our Department of State and to our Department of Defense to dispense to allies and friends around the world.

As Pacific Commander I was very unhappy in this respect because the amount of money that I had to share with forty-three countries amounted to less than 2 percent of the entire US foreign military assistance budget. The majority of foreign assistance money goes to Israel. I have to confess that when I came to Central Command, my view changed a little bit because I found that 75 percent of the foreign assistance budget actually came to the CENTCOM area and it was pretty much split equally between Israel and Egypt, a balance that today is changing slightly in favor of Israel. There is a phenomenal amount of money and assistance, which includes items such as F-16s, munitions, and top of the line technologies.

In the past year and a half of my engagement in Iraq and Afghanistan, we have had extensive cooperation with the IDF in one area in particular: the improvised explosive devices that the US military experienced in Iraq during the past year and a half and with which Israel certainly has great experience.

The newest major acquisition program in the US today is the F-35 fighter, another example of collaboration between the two countries. Are the US and Israel going to agree on every issue? Unlikely, particularly given the scope and scale of these programs, but there is extensive cooperation, and in real monetary terms, the tech exchange is the largest in the world.

The other side of the equation is the reality that we, from the American side, are trying to deal with broad region-wide issues and other world issues.

Back to the business of perceptions: the US is trying to help resolve very difficult challenges here in the region; that should be kept in mind. There should be no doubt about the commitment from the US to Israel in this regard, but there are many challenges and accounts to be balanced as we move forward.