

War Without Decision: In the Context of the Middle East - Part 1

by George Friedman - November 4, 2024

The Middle East is in disarray, and it's unclear if it can stabilize itself on its own. In many cases, a nation's military can serve this function if it's strong enough. But this is not one of those cases. Nations fighting for their lives require, have or crave that kind of power. The situation is such in the Middle East that it's hard to see this happening, and it's harder still to see the lesser powers involved acquiring the requisite influence to lay things to rest.

When I speak of military power, I do not mean the ability to launch airstrikes like the ones recently conducted by Israel. In the history of modern warfare, air power has been a valuable adjunct to combat but not a decisive one. The Japanese naval air force devastated Pearl Harbor and lost the war. The German Blitz on the United Kingdom killed many, as did the U.S. bombing of German cities. Whereas the Germans could not follow their strikes with an invasion, the Americans won the war with tanks. In Vietnam, Washington hammered Hanoi, but the light infantry of the Viet Cong ultimately won the day. Air power has many virtues, but it does not by itself win a war.

Partly that's because air attacks focus on specific targets – a munitions depot, an industrial center, and so on. But in large-scale wars, the most valuable real estate is the ground on which fighting and movement take place. Air power, then, is necessarily limited by mission and scope. Wars tend not to be limited affairs. They are won by rendering an enemy unable to resist or by breaking its will to resist. Of the two, the former is far more important. And one of the most effective ways to do that is to control the ground, be it a village or an entire country, which permits offensive operations to gain more ground.

So far, the war in the Middle East has focused on destroying capabilities rather than on seizing enough ground to break an enemy. It's true that Israel has a foothold in Lebanon, but it is not a decisive one. Since the war began, the Israelis have not definitively cut Hamas' lines of supply, nor have they broken Hamas' will or ability to fight. At the same time, Israel's enemies have yet to come close to defeating Israel. I argue that the biggest reason for these failures is the inability of either side to control the ground, isolate its enemy and block its enemy from countering a ground offensive.

This is important in its own right, and I will expand on its significance later this week. Iran, which may or may not retaliate for Israel's latest strikes, has the largest army in the Middle East, with armor bought from many countries including the United States. We need to see how firm Israel's command of the ground is, whether it has the confidence, appetite and capability to try to seize all or even part of the region, and whether its adversaries can resist it. History shows that air power won't be enough.

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