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## The Revolution in Military Affairs and the Changing Nature of Warfare in the Middle East

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By Dina Rezk

As a range of new and fantastic allied weapons systems descended upon Iraq's desert terrain in 1991 with unprecedented precision, speed and technological prowess, militarists all over the Western world hailed the advent of a 'revolution in military affairs' (RMA). The combination of technology and information dominance would ensure that modern war would be quick and easy, with minimal casualties on both sides. As the end of the Cold War brought the Middle East and Third World to the centre stage of international conflict, the Western world was consoled by a futuristic vision of efficient and sanitised battles; computer-game style warfare.

Almost two decades on, following high-tech military escapades in Afghanistan, Somalia, Kosovo and Iraq, which have been neither clean nor efficient, this so called 'revolution' in military affairs raised a plethora of questions regarding the nature of change, its implications on the battlefield and its effects on international relations and strategic warfare more generally, particularly in the Middle East where the locus of Western power has been consistently and vehemently challenged.

Have we been fighting faster and cleaner battles in distant lands with the help of superior technology and information? In a military sense, there have certainly been unprecedented advances. The first Gulf War in 1991 saw the use of Global Positioning Systems (GPS) and thermal night vision devices to allow coalition forces to exploit the desert terrain with twenty-four hour a day freedom of manoeuvre in all weather conditions. 'Operation Desert Storm' consisted of 43 days of strategic air attacks with precision bombing to gain air superiority and disrupt Iraqi command and control. It was the first time in the history of the British army that they knew where they were during a desert battle.

During the 18-hour firefight on 3-4 October 1993 in Mogadishu, Somalia provided another good case study of the use of real-time imagery under actual battle conditions. Equipped with the latest in portable tactical earpieces and handheld GPS systems, the American army's Delta Force and Rangers fought under the observation of Orion spy-planes and Recce helicopters relaying live, infra-red video images back to command headquarters. Responding to Somalian retaliation in a heavily populated region of Mogadishu, commanders used their unprecedented situational awareness to direct a convoy to a crash site.

And yet we have several examples which show the limits of the RMA's military achievements. Afghanistan aptly demonstrates the extent to which the Taliban and al-Qaeda were able to outsmart, avoid and adapt to US precision firepower. Similarly in 1999, Serbian Air Defence Operators did little more than turn their radars off to deny NATO aircraft the signals they needed to locate and destroy them. There has also been the problem of friendly fire, not surprisingly more of an occupational hazard now that commanders have their fingers on the trigger at such a great distance from the battlefield.

At a strategic level in the most recent invasion of Iraq ('Operation Iraqi Freedom') the 1st Marine Division raised the critical distinction between an awareness of an enemy's capability, where high tech intelligence devices certainly can and do play a role, and the more complex need to divine the intentions of enemy commanders. The latter requires a distinctly old-fashioned, human dimension which has been somewhat eluded by the new, shiny glamour of the RMA. In the case of Operation Iraqi Freedom, this proved a critical failing since more often than not plans were based on or keyed into specific enemy responses. This is all the more important when the cultural framework within which your enemy is operating is fundamentally different to your own: superimposing Western values to counterparts in the Middle East has consistently led to critical predictive failures in both Afghanistan and Iraq. Understanding the way your enemy thinks and how they are likely to react reveals itself as a problematic shortcoming of the RMA thus far and shows that certainly at a strategic level, it has some progress yet to make.

Taking the strategic point a step further, the numerous wars of the past two decades seem to demonstrate that the long-term vision and strategy that was once demanded to justify war has been subdued by the reassurance that victory will be certain and casualties few. Whilst precision firepower and high-tech intelligence certainly makes the job of military invasion easier, it has come as an unpleasant realisation to the West that in order to lay claim to political victory, the victor must confront the

defeated face to face. It is this victory that the US has yet to achieve most notably in Iraq and Afghanistan. That an invading and conquering army must now to be succeeded by an occupation force of an equal or larger size is perhaps the most revolutionary aspect of this new 'Western' way of war.

The more worrying question of course, is what happens when the RMA catches up with the Middle East. Some argue that the military successes of the RMA derive from the fact that the West has only flexed its military muscles in less developed parts of the world where its strength and superiority is clearly marked. What will a war look like when both sides have stealth technology and precision cruise missiles? In the meantime, (true to the history of warfare and the many that came before them) guerrillas, insurgents and terrorists have been able to identify the weaknesses of the high-tech Western world and capitalise on them. So far they have been unnervingly successful, as 9/11 poignantly illustrated. It is not insignificant that the development and growth of international terrorism has correlated with the eruption and exercise of the RMA in the Middle East and Third World. The past two decades have shown that despite the hopes of military propagandists, Western military strength and superiority is neither secure, nor does it guarantee political power. In the same way, political power in the modern world no longer depends on military strength. It is this redefined relationship between politics and warfare that the international community must now contend with.

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