



Withdrawing Under Fire: Lessons Learned from Islamist Insurgencies

By Joshua L. Gleis
Potomac Books, 2011
238 pp. \$29.95
ISBN: 978-1-59797-665-7

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A key challenge for academics the world over is conducting research that advances the understanding of their chosen fields of study. In some fields, the process of selecting a new topic might be compared to staring at a plate of spaghetti and untangling a single strand. In other fields, it is more akin to splitting a light beam with a prism and then selecting a sliver of the resultant rainbow as your academic focus area. In *Withdrawing Under Fire: Lessons Learned from Islamist Insurgencies*, Joshua Gleis uses his academic prism to dissect the study of armed conflict and, in turn, focus on the area of war termination theory. He then further refines his study to the subject of “when and how a state should withdraw from . . . [an Islamic] insurgency” (p. xiv).

Since Gleis’s book is derived from the dissertation he wrote while completing his doctorate at The Fletcher School, it follows a cogent and easy-to-follow structure. Chapters are divided into titled subsections that help readers trace the logical construction that Gleis has devised. Overall, the book first traces the evolution of irregular warfare and then provides a number of case studies. The first four depict how Islamic insurgencies were resolved by Great Britain, France, the Soviet Union, and the United States. A fifth case study, Israel, is examined over two chapters to reflect on how Tel Aviv has dealt with two types of insurgencies. Finally, a lengthy conclusion chapter summarizes both the author’s lessons learned and recommendations on

what conditions will most likely deliver a firmly resolved insurgency. The book concludes with robust endnotes and a thorough bibliography and index.

In his first chapter, Gleis offers a rapid review of the evolution of insurgency and how, over the past century, we have witnessed an increase in state repression that has served to mobilize the “grass roots” level of society to participate in insurgencies. He then provides a detailed explanation that seeks to define the characteristics of an Islamic insurgency and why they are noteworthy enough to merit a unique label as a fourth-generation mode of warfare. This uniqueness, we learn, is rooted in the use of suicide or martyrdom attacks, use of social welfare networks, and presence of outside state sponsorship. Seemingly simple and somewhat innocuous, these basic elements combine and leverage the fervor of religious conviction and the solidarity of shared ideology to develop a whole that is greater than the sum of its pieces. The first chapter concludes by discussing the “democratic dilemma” and the challenges confronted in a counterinsurgency environment where the state is faced with determining how it will conduct an effective counterinsurgency strategy designed to deter aggression while “maintaining the civil liberties of its domestic population,” and to do that while the insurgents are not similarly constrained (p. 11).

Chapters two through five are subsequently devoted to individual case studies. Listed sequentially, the case studies cover the British withdrawal from Iraq in the 1920s, the French withdrawal from Algeria in 1962, the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan in 1989, and the U.S. withdrawal from Somalia in 1994. Organized through the consistent use of subheadings, each chapter provides the relevant background followed by a focus on the tactics employed by the insurgency and the counterinsurgency forces, the factors leading to withdrawal, the consequences and subsequent policies, and finally an analysis of the campaign and its aftermath.

Chapters six and seven focus on Israel and its handling of the Hizballah insurgency in Lebanon in 2000 as well as the Hamas insurgency in Gaza in 2005. As a result of the nuanced history behind these case studies and the fact that the unsatisfactory resolution of the Lebanon withdrawal directly contributed to the Gaza uprising, these chapters, while retaining the same general categories as the previous case studies, are much more robustly developed in detailing all aspects of the campaign.

As generations of political and military leaders will attest, and as many academics will agree, the formulation of national strategic policy is an inexact process that relies heavily on experience and study to develop an awareness of what has both worked and failed in the past. Ultimately, the goal of our leaders should be to plan and to resolve conflicts, regardless of the specific type, allowing us to withdraw with honor and to not be faced with “repercussions [which] . . . may last for generations” (p. 149).

With such goals in mind, and with the current war in Afghanistan at a critical point, the final chapter is the most important. Focused on the lessons that Gleis has derived from his case studies, his recommendations are particularly relevant in Afghanistan since the civil-military leadership of many countries is concerned with “getting [the strategy] right” as they seek to balance the elements of strategy and art that will ultimately guide the coalition’s withdrawal.

While not a primer in the classic sense, these recommendations are a wide-ranging list that reflects the myriad considerations that commanders at all levels must deal with in developing and executing a transition and withdrawal strategy. In particular, Gleis notes the importance of clearly defining phases, controlling borders, declaring “red lines,” executing an effective strategic communication plan, establishing realistic goals, holding insurgents accountable to the rules of war, and supporting and protecting the public. This last element is, in fact, a truism clearly understood by counterinsurgency experts who have long advocated the “will of the people” as any insurgency’s “center of gravity.”

In the final analysis, *Withdrawing Under Fire* does not seek to provide a prescriptive solution for resolving any insurgency—Islamic or otherwise. It does, however, present a well-organized study of those issues that have, over the past century, most affected the ability of a nation to resolve and to withdraw from Islamic insurgencies. It is a study that casual readers can easily comprehend and that seasoned professionals would do well to review as a refresher on what they should be thinking about as they develop and enact strategy. **JFQ**

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