FM 3-24 and Religious Literacy in American Military Operations in the Middle East

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Abstract

In August 2021, the Taliban's success in Afghanistan shocked American citizens and foreign policy analysts alike. Many counterinsurgency experts sought to explain this phenomenon by focusing on tactical and strategic military failures; however, such explanations often neglected to investigate the religious literacy of American troops engaged in counterinsurgency operations in the Middle East. By considering the treatment of religious literacy in General David Petraeus's landmark field manual, *FM 3-24*, a startling degree of religious illiteracy is revealed within counterinsurgency operational protocols. While a historically and culturally focused "civilizational approach" is often proposed by foreign policy analysts as a potential solution to the problem of religious illiteracy in counterinsurgency operations, this approach also falls short of addressing the complex realities that confront American "liberators," whom locals often perceive to be foreign invaders. This article therefore addresses the disconnect between American military strategy, foreign policy, and the tactical realities encountered by military personnel stationed in the Middle East. Resultantly, this article argues that improved mandatory religious literacy training for American troops is critical not only for conducting successful operations in the Middle East but also for ending, rather than reinvigorating, conflicts abroad.

Key Terms: Religious literacy; American military operations; civilizational thinking; Middle East; Afghanistan; Iraq

Introduction

The failure of American foreign policy in the Middle East has generated discussion among foreign policy intellectuals and journalists alike. The ISIS victories in Iraq and Syria, and the rapid collapse of Ashraf Ghani's government in Afghanistan in August 2021, have spurred debate as Americans try to understand what happened and why. Foreign policy analysts (Gilmour, 2021; Barry, 2021) and counterinsurgency experts (Kilcullen, 2021) have critiqued the long-term inefficacy of American intervention by attending to American failures in Iraq and Afghanistan. Although their approaches have varied, the aforementioned scholars have all identified cultural and religious illiteracy as compromising American operations in the Middle East. At first glance, it might be assumed that American military strategists have overlooked crucial local factors, such as religious customs and traditions. On the contrary, a wealth of strategic materials has been produced to promote greater cultural and religious literacy among American military personnel. Notable titles have included William Wunderle's *Through the Lens of Cultural Awareness* (2006) and the U.S. Marine Corps's *Report on the Cultural Intelligence Seminar on Afghan Perceptions* (2001). As will be discussed at greater length, General David Petraeus's undertaking of a comprehensive field manual for counterinsurgency (COIN)[2] proved to be an exceptionally difficult project from the outset. Indeed, the task of writing one manual to competently advise American military strategists on all manifestations of insurgency was a difficult, if not impossible, endeavour. The marketing of Petraeus's COIN manual, titled *FM 3-24,* as a comprehensive resource for COIN was further complicated by Petraeus's generalized treatment of culture and religion in the Middle East. While *FM 3-24* does not downplay the importance of cultural literacy for COIN operations, the same cannot be said for religion. Examining Petraeus's treatment of religion in this landmark COIN manual reveals a stark disconnect between American military strategies, tactical realities, and foreign policies in the Middle East. Moreover, an exploration of this disconnect reveals new possibilities for future American counterinsurgency field manuals to emphasize cultural and religious literacy for the purpose of preventing further conflict abroad.

FM 3-24 has long been heralded as the preeminent counterinsurgency manual of the twenty-first century. Written in 2006 for the U.S. Army and Marine Corps, the manual updated COIN strategies first developed in the 1980s by emphasizing operations in the Middle East (Petraeus, 2006, p. iii). The manual is therefore a rich primary source for evaluating American counterinsurgency and military strategies, including the integration of civilian and military activities, leadership ethics for counterinsurgency tactics, and linguistic support for American troops. In Petraeus's introduction to the manual, two points are made clear: conventional tactics fail against insurgents (p. x), and successful COIN strategies rely on local support (p. xii). In terms of the latter, winning the trust of locals largely depends on the ability of foreign occupiers (or "liberators") to become sufficiently conversant in regional cultures and customs. Thus, *FM 3-24* acknowledges the importance of cultural awareness; however, as this article establishes, Petraeus's manual too often treats religion as a mere subset of culture—an issue that has been criticized by military commentators (Danan, 2007; Hoffman, 2007). Indeed, in *FM 3-24,* Petraeus's most extensive exploration of the impact of religion on COIN operations in the Middle East is found under the heading of "culture" (2006, pp. 3–6).

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[2] The term counterinsurgency (COIN) refers to a military strategy designed to combat guerilla and non-state forces.

A major criticism of U.S. COIN strategy in the Middle East is its perceived conflation of non-secular and secular insurgencies, in which non-secular insurgencies refer to the religious practices that prompt material and territorial militarized goals—as exemplified by the insurgencies led by al-Qaeda and ISIS (para. 1–23). In contrast, secular insurgencies have been defined as military actions driven by non-religious ideologies and motives—as exemplified by the secular insurgencies that transpired in Vietnam, the Philippines, and Malaysia (Hoffman, 2007, p. 2). However, the criteria imposed by Western military strategists to distinguish religious from secular insurgencies, and religiosity from secularity more generally, are often ill-suited to the operational realities on the ground. For example, in Vietnam, the secular communism that emerged with the inauguration of Ho Chi Minh's government was combined with Buddhism and Confucianism to produce a geopolitical climate in which the public practice of Buddhism was largely accepted (Matthews, 1992, p. 68). Given such complexities, religious scholar William Cavanaugh (2009) has questioned whether secular and non-secular concepts might be further complicated by the introduction of secular religions. To this issue, Cavanaugh has suggested that it can be exceedingly difficult to differentiate between secular and non-secular motivations. When discussing insurgencies that are in equal measure religious, cultural, and political, it is questionable as to whether these binaries are useful. Still, COIN strategists identify religious and secular insurgencies as fundamentally different. The main concern for military strategists is whether financial or material incentives (which might appeal to secular insurgents) would be effective with religious insurgents concerned with non-material objectives, such as enforcing religious orthodoxy or ritual (Hoffman, 2007, p. 78).

While Petraeus's *FM 3-24* perceives "religion" and "culture" to be interrelated, religion is often erroneously viewed as a subcategory of culture. If religion is a subset of culture, as Petraeus has argued, it becomes difficult to understand how religious movements can be countercultural. Historically, religious movements often reckon with broader cultural trends, as evidenced by the Islamic Revolution in Iran. Situating religion as a mere subset of culture implies a false hierarchy in which the two are distinct. For instance, the 2003 American occupation of Najaf in Iraq exemplifies the prominence of religious leaders over secular institutions. In this instance, American security arrangements were made with the holy city's religious leader, Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, rather than with the city's mayor or chief of police (McGlinchey, 2022, p. 107). Thus, as this example illustrates, the hierarchical privileging of religion as a subset of culture proposed by Petraeus does not always cohere with reality. Indeed, Western strategists often prioritize elements of secular culture over religious affiliations in an attempt to explain foreign social and civil structures. For example, democracy might be used as a reference point for state governance, or Western observers might deem secular political groups inherently "modern" and thereby privilege Western worldviews. Unfortunately, these rigid binaries often turn out to be more confounding than elucidating.

This binary thinking is ineffective since the relationship between cultural/religious and secular/non-secular categories is porous and negotiable, as renowned anthropologist Talal Asad has affirmed in his scholarship, which positions religion as a transhistorical and transcultural phenomenon (1993, p. 28). To identify religion as a subset of culture, then, disregards complex circumstances in which religion may transcend, usurp, or lend additional meaning to cultural identity. While cultural identity may shift over time, religious identities are often firmly rooted in issues of mortality, divinity, salvation, and fate. Therefore, the tendency of Western foreign policy strategists to opt for binary categories to describe social phenomena obscures the manner in which secular culture and religious identities may overlap within a complex process of negotiation.

Religion as Defined in *FM 3-24*

In *FM 3-24*, Petraeus defines culture as "the muscle on the bones" of a society's social structure (2006, para. 3–36). This metaphor situates religion as a sociocultural rather than political, economic, or militaristic force. Despite Petraeus's reluctance to portray religion as a dominant force connected to yet distinct from culture, he concedes that culture is "a system of shared beliefs, values, customs, behaviours, and artifacts that members of a society use to cope with their world and one another" (para. 3–37). Petraeus's definition is noteworthy because, at times, Petraeus has used "culture" as an interchangeable synonym for "religion." For example, Petraeus has written that "culture influences how people make judgments about what is right and wrong," and that "culture also includes under what circumstances the 'rules' shift and change" (para. 3–38). While such statements do not explicitly reference religion, the concept is circuitously evoked within these passages. Furthermore, Petraeus has recommended that American troops concern themselves with understanding the "culture of the society as a whole" only *after* mapping the social structure of each region (para. 3–36). Asserting that societal structures can be understood by military personnel without preliminary knowledge of regional culture is indicative of Petraeus's hierarchical conception of religion and culture. Why, for instance, should social structures not be viewed as emerging from culture? How can a culture be understood without a firm grasp of that region's religious communities? In his since-deleted *New York Post* op-ed on Petraeus's manual, retired Lieutenant Colonel Ralph Peters has suggested that *FM 3-24* overlooks religious belief as the chief motivation for insurgency (2006). To Peters, "the politically correct atmosphere in Washington deems any discussion of religion as a strategic factor indelicate" (2006, para. 11). Yet, Peters's claim is not substantiated by a more thorough reading of *FM 3-24,* in which religion is repeatedly cited as a possible motive for insurgency. Indeed, to dispel such misinterpretations, this article examines how Petraeus's field manual situates religion in terms of insurgents and local populations, and the possible implications of that positioning for the tactical realities of American COIN operations in the Middle East.

In the "culture" section of *FM 3-24,* Petraeus has drawn generalized connections between religious identity and insurgency. More specifically, in a section on leadership, Petraeus has suggested that identity-based insurgencies are often led by traditional authority figures, such as "tribal sheikhs, local warlords, or religious leaders" (2006, para. 1–73). According to Petraeus, the authorities responsible for leading insurgencies often employ religious concepts to mobilize local support for political goals (para. 1–75). Citing al-Qaeda's example, Petraeus summarizes their aims as the desire to "reverse the decline of the ummah[3] [to] bring about its inevitable triumph over Western imperialism" (para. 1–76). Given this definition, Petraeus neglects to acknowledge the existence of numerous religious moderates unaffiliated with al-Qaeda (Danan & Hunt, 2007, p. 6). Although Petraeus's field manual emphasizes the role of religion in insurgencies, *FM 3-24* fails to explore the significance of religion for moderate local populations in the Middle East.

In contrast, former U.S. Department of State employee Liora Danan has argued that military strategies and tactical operations must pay serious attention to the influence and impact of religion (Danan & Hunt, 2007, p.1). To illustrate this point, Danan cites the U.S. government's reluctance to encourage negotiations between the Islamic Courts Union and Transitional Federal Government in Somalia due to American concerns that union moderates might create an Islamic

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[3] Defined by the Collins English Dictionary (n.d.) as "the Muslim community throughout the world" (https://www.collinsdictionary.com/us/dictionary/english/ummah).

state more closely aligned with al-Qaeda (p. 6). Crucially, Petraeus's association of moderate religious identities with insurgency, without adequate recognition of the broader significance of religious identity for local populations, has led to missed opportunities for greater social stability within various regions in the Middle East (p. 6).

When Petraeus explicitly addresses religious identity in *FM 3-24*, the topic is handled concurrently with national and racial identities, which is dangerously reductive. Throughout *FM 3-24*, Petraeus deems religious affiliation to be a primary cultural identity (para. 3–7). In reality, sociocultural, political, economic, and religious identities might all be prioritized as primary for an individual. Thus, religious identity is not just significant for evaluating insurgencies, as Petraeus has suggested; it is also crucial for establishing relationships with local populations. Indeed, Petraeus's manual urges U.S. forces to "show respect for local religions and traditions" by avoiding actions that might "undermine or change the local religion or traditions" (para. 6–60). Strikingly, later in the same passage, Petraeus contradicts this statement by adding that military personnel "have a mission to reduce the effects of dysfunctional social practices" (para. 6–60), which thus hints at a Western "civilizing" mission couched within the pretext of America's War on Terror. Petraeus's manual thus examines the significance of religious identity within the context of insurgencies rather than in relation to the traditions and customs of local populations. That is, Petraeus attributes the ability of insurgents to garner popular support to religious or cultural ideological appeals: "the most powerful ideologies tap latent, emotional concerns of the populace [including] religious objectives, desire for justice, [and] ethnic aspirations" (para. 1–75). In this sense, Petraeus describes religious identity as a tool wielded exclusively by insurgents instead of as a potential point of connection to be leveraged by "liberating" forces. Petraeus's manual goes on to suggest that U.S. military personnel can reduce the efficacy of insurgent recruitment efforts through economic incentives, employment opportunities (i.e., public works projects), and the establishment of a civil defense corps (para. 5–48). Yet, as foreign policy expert Frank Hoffman aptly remarked in his critique of *FM 3-24*, it is questionable whether COIN operations can effectively counter identity-based insurgencies with economic incentives, since "economic inducements and material gains" are unlikely to "overcome someone's faith or religious identity" (2007, p. 78).

In short, *FM 3-24* suggests that successful COIN operations cultivate cooperative relationships with the local populace, which requires that military personnel understand how nationality, race, ethnicity, and religion might shape local identities. In addition to offering little specific advice on how to foster this understanding, Petraeus's emphasis on the relationship between insurgency and religion prioritizes the identities of insurgents over those of local religious moderates. Ultimately, this positioning leaves troops well-informed about the significance of religion to insurgents yet largely unaware of how religion might function within the broader community. At best, this framing obfuscates the religious practices and cultural traditions of locals and, at worst, renders these practices and customs inherently radical, which may lead to encounters that erode the possibility for civil-military cooperation.

The Genealogy of *FM 3-24*

Petraeus's treatment of religion in *FM 3-24* was likely influenced by such counter-insurgency texts as David Galula's *Counterinsurgency Warfare* (1964) and Robert Thompson's *Defeating Communist Insurgency* (1966). While Petraeus's manual provides a much-needed update to extant literature on counterinsurgency, he has drawn from materials developed during

previous eras of secular conflicts. Indeed, Petraeus dedicates no less than one-third of his bibliography to the classics of counterinsurgency. Thus, while claiming to modernize previous COIN strategies, *FM 3-24* relies on tactics forged almost half-a-century prior. In response, Hoffman's critique of *FM 3-24* has focused on its failure to adapt to a rapidly changing operational landscape. In particular, Hoffman has declared the manual "relatively mute on the subject" of religion, which may indicate that the "classicists" have "won" (2007, p. 78). In his most compelling critique of the field manual, Hoffman rejects the presumed transcendence of Western ideals:

> The manual's operational approach never deviates from Galula or Thompson's guidance. It never acknowledges that these guidelines assume that the target population has a value system similar to America's, or fundamental concepts regarding political order that are consistent with that of a representative democracy, universal individual rights, and free market economies. But if the population's value system is not consistent with these basic elements of the US approach … we may need a dramatically revised counter-insurgency strategy. (2007, p. 78)

To his credit, Petraeus has noted in *FM 3-24* that "American ideas of what is 'normal' or 'rational' are not universal" (2006, para. 1–80). While this admission might appear to undermine Hoffman's critique, in this instance Petraeus has focused on certain superficial differences that might surprise American troops, such as local levels of religious devotion, behaviour, and gender norms. Although Petraeus has described certain behaviours and gender norms as varying across cultures, his manual does not adequately challenge the universal appeal of Western ideals, such as the desirability of a representational democracy. Hence Petraeus's manual does not dispute Galula's and Thompson's presumption that fundamental concepts can be applied to a range of regions yet still remain salient (Hoffman, 2007). Consequently, this article contends that basic Western assumptions, such as the idealization of a secularized democratic state, cannot be imposed from without onto the Middle East. While Petraeus's introduction to *FM 3-24* indicates that "all insurgencies are different," the manual subsequently suggests that insurgencies follow broad historical trends of motivation (2006, p. x). Petraeus's fundamental argument regarding the nature of insurgencies, therefore, seems to oscillate between recognizing geographic and cultural specificities and refusing to acknowledge that patterns among insurgencies might be the exception, rather than the rule. As foreign policy expert Andrew Skitt Gilmour has suggested in "Re-envisioning the Middle East" (2021), many foreign policy intellectuals raised during the Cold War remain "reluctant to revisit basic assumptions about how the United States acts toward the wider Middle East" (2021, p. 22). Hoffman and Gilmour thus concur that the greatest flaw in *FM 3-24* is Petraeus's tendency to cast a net so wide that it does little to prepare American military personnel for tactical realities in the Middle East. In purporting to have produced a comprehensive manual of counterinsurgency, Petraeus has assumed that insurgencies—across varied geographical, cultural, political, economic, and religious contexts—share fundamental qualities that a generalized manual can identify and thereby offer a framework for effective action.

Military Strategy Versus Tactical Reality

The disconnect between military strategies and tactical realities is glaring in Petraeus's manual. Most notably, Petraeus has emphasized the importance of coordination with locals while offering no resources to improve cultural and religious literacy among American military

personnel. Tellingly, the annotated bibliography of *FM 3-24* contains nine specific resources on Vietnam, 10 on Iraq, and only four on Afghanistan (2006, Bib-1). Furthermore, in the references of *FM 3-24*, only two sources deal with religion in the Middle East: Gilles Kepel's *The War for Muslim Minds* (2004) and Bernard Lewis's *The Crisis of Islam* (2003). Both texts advance dangerous generalizations about the nature of Islam. Tellingly, Kepel's book begins by citing Ayman al-Zawahiri's December 2001 manifesto[4] prior to declaring the Middle East a "hotbed" of religious extremism (2004, p. 1). Similarly, in Lewis's chapter, "Defining Islam," the author inaccurately posits that there are only two Islamic traditions: "one authoritarian and quietist, the other radical and activist" (2003, p. 11).

It might be assumed that in 2006, Petraeus lacked access to cultural surveys of the Middle East deemed fit for use by the U.S. military; however, closer examination indicates otherwise. For example, in her 2014 "Cross-Cultural Competence in the Department of Defense," Senior Advisor to the United States Department of the Navy Jessica Gallus cites dozens of religious primers published prior to *FM 3-24* that Petraeus neglected to include. The U.S. Marine Corps's 2001 *Report on the Cultural Intelligence Seminar on Afghan Perceptions*, for example, highlights not only the "mannerisms, attitudes, and proper etiquette" specific to Afghanistan but also approaches to "nation building and negotiation methods" for COIN operations (p. 50). Moreover, a 2005 article by Georgia Chao and Henry Moon stresses the importance of educating American military personnel about intersectional cultural identities within their area of operations (p. 57). The omission of such primers from Petraeus's field manual has serious implications at a tactical level. As Danan has recounted, when interviewing Afghan civilians about the presence of American troops stationed in Afghanistan, one civilian stated that American soldiers "come with their boots into our mosques. That is why everyone is fighting against them" (Danan & Hunt, 2007, p. 7).[5] The previous statement thus attests to the urgent need for foreign military personnel to respect both local customs and religious traditions in the Middle East.

In a 2021 interview with Mimi Geerges for *Government Matters*, combat interpreter for the U.S. Forces Baktash Ahadi has suggested that incidents of religious illiteracy were the main reason Afghans perceived the Taliban as the "lesser of two evils" when confronted with the choice of Taliban or American occupation. Indeed, Ahadi sums up the failure of American troops in Afghanistan concisely: "The United States did not take the time nor effort to understand the people they were trying to serve" (0:36). In what is, perhaps, the most egregious example of religious illiteracy, Ahadi describes how American troops burnt the Quran at the Bagram Airbase in 2012 to prevent Taliban prisoners from sending messages to each other, which resulted in nationwide protests against American and NATO forces (1:10). It is difficult to imagine American forces succeeding in their quest to win over the "hearts and minds" of Afghan locals in light of such incidents. Ahadi's perspective therefore calls into question whether American failures in the Middle East are primarily tactical and strategic, or systemic shortcomings seeded by the foreign policies that brought American troops to the region in the first place.

FM 3-24's tendency to neglect tactical realities also brings to the fore broader limitations within American COIN and military strategies. In *The Ledger* (2021), counterinsurgency expert David Kilcullen and former advisor to NATO forces Greg Mills attribute the failure of American troops to secure stability in Afghanistan to the military strategies espoused in *FM 3-24*. Kilcullen and Mills have stated that, while COIN theory views military strategies as secondary to "civilian,

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[4] Zawahiri's December 2001 manifesto claims responsibility for the 9/11 terrorist attacks (Kepel, 2003, p. 1).
[5] Shoes are considered impure and must be removed before entering Muslim prayer halls (Becker, 2018, p. 87).

political governance, and development means," the subordination of military forces to civilian agencies was not possible in Afghanistan due to "a lack of civilian expertise" (p. 59). While Petraeus has frequently emphasized that collaborative relationships with local populations are the most effective "weapon" against insurgents, *FM 3-24* does not provide American military personnel with the resources needed to cultivate such relationships. That is, the manual operates on a level too far abstracted from tactical realities to be effective. For example, *FM 3-24* identifies religious schools and mosques as potential sites of support for insurgents (para. 1–90) without deeming religious literacy a prerequisite for engaging in COIN operations in religious settings. Furthermore, such sites are also likely to attract the very locals that troops seek to forge trusting relationships with, and potential religious blunders would not be easily forgotten (Danan & Hunt, 2007, p. 7). Kilcullen and Mills go on to cite Britain's involvement in Afghanistan in order to highlight the direct connection between strategic and tactical failures:

> There were strenuous—and, often, successful—attempts to improve the tactical performance of armies that were not, for the most part, designed, trained or equipped for the task they faced in Afghanistan. For all the puffing up of the relevance of Britain's experience in Northern Ireland, the intervening coalition in Afghanistan [was] mostly comprised [of] militaries focused on conventional warfare. (2021, p. 59)

Thus, while allied NATO forces might have improved tactically, conventional warfare strategies remained largely unsuccessful in Afghanistan. Similarly, the failure of American troops to secure long-term stability in Afghanistan was rooted in an unsatisfactory understanding of the region and a disconnect between American military strategies and tactical realities. In 2022, it does not seem that American military operations in the Middle East have progressed much beyond the War on Terror and the quashing of groups deemed to be hostile toward the West.

Ideals of American Foreign Policies and a Way Forward

Critical commentaries on American involvement in the Middle East can be classified into the following groups: 1) critics who focus on the actions of U.S. forces "on the ground" to discuss the ideological aims of U.S. intervention and nebulous boundaries of the War on Terror (Ahadi, 2021; Danan & Hunt, 2007); 2) critics who focus on the overall operational framework of American intervention to explain its failures (Hoffman, 2007; Kilcullen & Mills, 2021); and, 3) critics who highlight critical Western misconceptions about the geographical features, cultures, and religions of the Middle East (Dadkhah, 2013; Gilmour, 2021). In light of these strands of critical commentary, Central Intelligence Agency veteran Andrew Skitt Gilmour has offered compelling alternatives to the current strategies employed by U.S. foreign policy analysts. Gilmour's envisioning of a "civilizational approach" (2021) to foreign policy in the Middle East has purported to enhance the cultural and religious literacy of American military personnel by promoting informed cooperation with local populations over time, rather than as a means to an end. As Gilmour has explained, "civilizational thinking" appreciates the importance of history, tradition, and religion in military operations (p. 24). Furthermore, the theoretical framework that guides a "civilizational" approach maintains an informed understanding of the nuanced relationship between religion and culture. This approach avoids projecting Western liberal ideals of freedom and democracy onto the context of the Middle East. Instead, this approach allows local

actors to contextualize Western ideals in light of longstanding regional customs and traditions (p. 24). For Gilmour, American foreign policy strategists must decentre their worldviews, including Western notions of secularity, statehood, liberalism, and religion, to create opportunities for local populations to engage with those concepts on their own terms. A COIN manual composed to foreground Gilmour's civilizational approach would differ dramatically from Petraeus's *FM 3-24*. Indeed, such a manual would not operate according to the rigid categories of secular/non-secular or religious/cultural; rather, a COIN manual guided by a civilizational approach would recognize and preserve the overlap between such categories to acknowledge their complexity. In addition to advocating for a historically and culturally informed framework for American foreign policy in the Middle East, Gilmour has contended that American COIN strategies must acknowledge "Islam as an enduring socio-political force" (2021, p. 24). Much like Danan and Hunt, Gilmour has disputed the conflation of Islam with religious extremism by citing Algerian scholar Mohammed Arkoun's support of a moderate Islamic humanism purposed to "transcend both a consumerist, intellectually shallow West and Islamic religious zealotry" (p. 24). In this respect, Arkoun's scholarship exemplifies how humanist ideals might be applied within the Middle East.

Unfortunately, Gilmour's vision for improving American foreign policies remains disconnected from both American military strategies and tactical realities. How might the implementation of a civilizational approach change the tactical operations of "boots on the ground?" Would the training of the American military personnel include studying the national histories and present-day theologies of each deployment location? It appears quite possible that, even if the U.S. military implemented formal pre-deployment civilizational training, such an approach would not suffice to facilitate the cultural and religious acumen necessary for U.S. personnel to overcome their perceived role as unwelcome foreign occupiers. If, as Gilmour has suggested, Cold War era analysts refuse to revisit basic assumptions about America's foreign policy goals in the Middle East (2021, p. 22), it is probable that American military strategists might be equally reluctant, if not vehemently opposed, to overhauling the basic tenets of current military training. Given that a 2021 Gallup poll revealed six out of 10 Americans supported the withdrawal of US troops deployed to Afghanistan (Newport), efforts to reform military training during the twilight of American involvement in the Middle East might prove ill-timed. Still, Gilmour's civilizational approach should not be discounted entirely: revising *FM 3-24* through a civilizational lens might produce an entirely different manual keyed to the cultural and religious complexities specific to each region.

Evaluating the treatment of religion and its implications in Petraeus's *FM 3-24* brings to light previously unaddressed frictions and disconnections between American military strategies, tactical realities, and ideological visions for continued U.S. involvement in the Middle East. While Petraeus's positioning of religion as a subset of culture gives rise to misperceptions about the religious identities of local populations, that issue is not the most serious failure of *FM 3-24*. Urging troops to win local support through forming enduring regional alliances, without offering any specific insights as to how to do so, is both impractical and dangerous. Furthermore, relegating the cultivation of religious literacy to individual military personnel leaves too much room for error. Without a coherent curriculum of religious acumen training tailored to COIN operatives, establishing civil-military cooperation will remain unachievable. Furthermore, producing a general COIN field manual on the premise that regionally diverse insurgencies share a common set of characteristics only obscures elements that are contextually contingent and thus unique. Therefore, an amended civilizational approach that might help to bridge potential gaps between ideologies, strategies, and tactics. It is no stretch of the imagination to envision a revised *FM 3-24*

manual that revisits culture and religion through a civilizational approach to reframe COIN strategies in terms of regional customs and histories. The idea that this process might be guided by local actors themselves holds particular promise. In 2021, Ahadi advised the Pentagon to "talk to Afghans" (Geerges, 2021, 5:18). Moreover, Dan Schueftan has stated that the "solution" to conflicts in the Middle East "must be indigenous" (as cited in Dadkhah, 2013). A civilizational approach to current counterinsurgency protocols may encourage the production of regionally specific, religiously literate, and culturally sound manuals for each conflict as required. While perhaps sacrificing the "simplicity" of *FM 3-24,* the creation of American COIN manuals that emphasize the agency and breadth of local knowledge may help to narrow the gap between military strategies and applied tactics in order to end, rather than reinvigorate, conflicts abroad.

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