Intervention: Limits of U.S Power?

A panel discussion organized by the

Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy and International Affairs (IFI)

and the Center for American Studies and Research (CASAR)

American University of Beirut

Summary by Joey Shea & Bayan Jaber

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The Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy and International Affairs (IFI) and the Center for American Studies and Research (CASAR) at AUB held a panel discussion entitled “Intervention: Limits of U.S Power?” on October 13, 2014 at the American University of Beirut (AUB). The panel featured Vijay Prashad, IFI Senior Research Fellow and Lisa Hajjar, Edward Said Chair of American Studies, CASAR. As a result of Obama’s recent authorization of air-strikes in Iraq, this panel focused on US intervention policy and argued that, despite uncontested military hegemony, America is increasingly restrained by political concerns and strategic incoherence.

Vijay Prashad discussed US intervention policy and began with a distinction between two concepts: American power and American primacy. Recent literature argues that the power of the United States is declining on the world stage. Prashad thinks that this is exaggerated as the military prowess of the US is undeniable: America military power has global reach and incredible capacity. The US creates extraterritorial agreements with states and maintains bases where American troops are outside the domestic legal framework. Because of this, Prashad thinks that the literature on the decline of the United States is actually misplaced: indeed, American power is going to be around for a long time.

Instead, Prashad posits that there is a decline of American primacy. He explained the dynamics of US primacy and traced its emergence back to 1991. In the post-war period, the US State Department envisioned a world order where no one would be able to challenge US interests. There was a relative check on this until 1990, when the Soviet Union collapsed. After
this collapse, significant changes occurred in the international arena. Prashad explained this change with an anecdote: recorded conversations of Saddam Hussein were seized in Iraq in 2003, and it was revealed that during the Gulf War in 1991, he asked, “Where are the Soviets?” For Prashad, the end of the Soviet Union in 1991 marked the beginning of American primacy.

Furthermore, Prashad explained that we are presently witnessing the limits of this American primacy. The US is unable to dictate an agenda. This development occurred via the emergence of the strategic complexity which came with the arrival of the BRICS countries: Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa. The emergence of these countries is particularly important and there is little focus on this dynamic.

Prashad carried on, identifying the cause of the political decline of American primacy on two levels: the macro, geopolitical level and the domestic, regional level.

With respect to the macro, geopolitical level, Prashad noted that the United States has set forth various regimes to circumvent politics specifically within the Security Council. The most salient example of this is that of the “Responsibility to Protect” (R2P) doctrine. R2P is a doctrine that appears apolitical, whereby it is decided that there is a catastrophe and then the full force of the military is allowed. Most importantly, this categorization needs to be made first. It is in this categorization where politics emerge. Indeed, many speak about the hypocrisy of R2P. For example, why was there intervention in Libya on the basis of humanitarian necessity and not in Gaza? Prashad claimed this is not hypocrisy: it is merely politics. He identified hypocrisy with morality and politics with power. Currently, at the macro-level, it is increasingly difficult for the US to easily mobilize the political agenda via moralistic language. Both United Nations Security Council (UNSC) Resolutions 1973 and 1970, pertaining to the Libya intervention, aroused general dismay amongst the BRICS countries. India in particular became a major critic of R2P, claiming that it was politics masquerading as morality.

As for the domestic politics and regional level, Prashad emphasized that we must not diminish the fact that the Islamic State (IS, formerly ISIS/ISIL) presents a serious threat to the region. Yet, the public posture of U.S. foreign policy is idealist, while the actual operation of US foreign policy is realist. They are trapped in a rhetoric of evangelism: the narrative of freedom over authoritarianism is cartoonistic, deemed Prashad. And, unsurprisingly, this particular US framework does not work on the ground and they are left with only one option: aerial bombardment. All sitting commanders admit that an aerial campaign is not going to be enough. Yet, inaction is impossible for the United States because they are driven by their ideological savior complex.

Lisa Hajjar continued the discussion, pointing out that the US rarely accepts responsibility for their mistakes. She noted that the events taking place today could be explained by looking back at the history of insurgency, but that no one would be willing to discuss their contribution to the crisis. She further discussed the technologies of
interventionism. She noted that the rise of IS was tackled with an amplification of drone warfare logic. Why does America have this ‘no boots on the ground’ strategy? It is because Americans are tired of the particular kind of war seen in Iraq and Afghanistan. Americans are tired of blood costs of occupation: these missions were not fruitful and did not achieve any victories. Counterinsurgency (COIN) was intended to incapacitate insurgents with militarized social engineering. But now, COIN is over and is perceived to have failed. One can argue that the massive uptake of drone warfare by Obama is due to the disrepute of COIN.

According to Hajjar, the strategy of “no boots on the ground” reflects a lack in intelligence which hinders US military capacity. Even with the required intelligence, a war against IS requires man power. Hajjar explained that it takes thirty people to operate a drone and around eighty to analyze the information obtained.

Indeed, America’s entire military program is changing because of the rise of IS. But there is a problem because there is no intelligence on the ground. Both panelists concluded by agreeing that this intervention is actually a war without strategy, just tactics.