



A Weary Hercules: The United States and the Fertile Crescent in a Post-Caliphate Era

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Abstract: *Since the 9/11 attacks, the United States has tended to engage in regime change missions with a short-term and improvisational approach that focuses on removing adversaries from the battlefield rather than achieving consolidated political gains. Today, Washington may repeat the same mistake by prioritizing the military destruction of ISIS, rather than creating a tolerable political order. The policy challenges are particularly acute because, like a weary Hercules, Washington is confronted with endless labor, but limited capability. The answer is to pursue a long-term strategic approach that aligns the ends and means of war, seeks ugly stability rather than illusory goals, accepts that nation-building in some form is inevitable, and wins the narrative war.*

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“Now that the New Order is past, and the Thousand-Year Reich has crumbled in a decade, we are able at last, picking among the still smoking rubble, to discover the truth about that fantastic and tragical episode.”¹ With these words, British historian Hugh Trevor-Roper began his book on the fall of Nazi Germany, *The Last Days of Hitler*. Seven decades later, another

¹ Hugh Trevor-Roper, *The Last Days of Hitler* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1992), 53.

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group based on ideological extremism and slavery, ISIS, launched a lightning war that seized vast territory, took on a grand allied coalition, and was ultimately pushed back to the charred ruins of its capital. In October 2017, U.S.-backed Kurdish militias captured Raqqa in northern Syria, the headquarters of ISIS's self-declared Caliphate. By early 2018, the extremist group had lost 98 percent of the territory it once held. The Third Reich lasted a decade; the Caliphate survived for barely three years. U.S. President Donald Trump declared that, "The defeat of ISIS in Raqqa represents a critical breakthrough in our worldwide campaign to defeat ISIS and its wicked ideology."² Does the collapse of the Caliphate represent the kind of decisive victory seen in 1945? Or will the ISIS *Götterdämmerung* in Raqqa echo the Nazi downfall in Berlin only in the scale of devastation?

Today, in the Fertile Crescent, the United States is a weary Hercules. The labors required to tackle the root causes of ISIS are virtually limitless. But the available resources are finite and probably declining, with domestic pressure to turn the page on endless Middle East quagmires, as well as competing security challenges in East Asia, Ukraine, and elsewhere. Given this mismatch between need and capacity, how can Washington prevent battlefield success from proving to be a hollow victory?

One approach is to consider the destruction of the Caliphate as a regime change operation. The campaign against ISIS shares a number of similarities with earlier U.S. missions to topple governments in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Libya, while also exhibiting distinctive features. This analytical perspective raises an immediate red flag. Washington has a long record in regime change operations of achieving initial kinetic feats, but failing to secure consolidated political gains. There is a risk of repeating this mistake today because U.S. officials are often focused on a narrow mission to destroy ISIS rather than a broader agenda to build a sustainable order or engage in the dreaded task of "nation-building."

It is certainly tempting to declare victory and walk away from the smoking ruins of Raqqa. But the war is not over. The retreat of ISIS is just one chapter in a broader conflict that has killed 400,000 Syrians and displaced more than half the population of Syria and shows few signs of ending. Critical decisions are being made that will establish the contours of the new regional system. For Washington, the best approach is to broaden the conception of victory, adopt a long-term horizon, and deploy finite capabilities in an efficient manner to protect core interests and achieve limited but valuable goals.

The Stakes

With the Caliphate largely dismantled, and ISIS seemingly on the run, the United States may seek to downsize its commitment to the region or even abandon the Fertile Crescent to its own devices. Washington could finally end an era of military intervention in the Middle East, which has cost thousands of American lives and hundreds of billions of dollars. After all, historically, the United States had two

² "Raqqa May Have Fallen, But Syrian Humanitarian Group Still Fears Instability," *CBS News*, October 30, 2017.

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