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## Failed States and States of Failure

### “We Destroyed the Cities to Save Them” and Other Future Headlines

By [Tom Engelhardt](#)

One of the charms of the future is its powerful element of unpredictability, its ability to ambush us in lovely ways or bite us unexpectedly in the ass. Most of the futures I imagined as a boy have, for instance, come up deeply short, or else I would now be flying my individual [jet pack](#) through the spired cityscape of New York and vacationing on the moon. And who, honestly, could have imagined the Internet, no less social media and cyberspace (unless, of course, you had [read](#) William Gibson's novel *Neuromancer* 30 years ago)? Who could have dreamed that a single country's intelligence outfits would be able to [listen in on](#) or otherwise intercept and review not just the conversations and messages of its own citizens -- imagine the totalitarian regimes of the twentieth century -- but those of just about anyone on the planet, from peasants in the [backlands](#) of Pakistan to at least [35 leaders](#) of major and minor countries around the world? This is, of course, our dystopian present, based on technological breakthroughs that even sci-fi writers somehow didn't imagine.

And who thought that the Arab Spring or Occupy Wall Street were coming down the pike or, for that matter, a terror caliphate in the heart of the former Middle East or a Donald Trump presidential run that would go from success to success amid free media coverage the likes of which we've seldom seen? (Small career tip: don't become a seer. It's hell on Earth.)

All of this might be considered the bad but also the good news about the future. On an increasingly grim globe that seems to have failure stamped all over it, the surprises embedded in the years to come, the unexpected course changes, inventions, rebellions, and interventions offer, at least until they arrive, grounds for hope. On the other hand, in that same grim world, there's an aspect of the future that couldn't be more depressing: the repetitiveness of so much that you might think no one would want to repeat. I'm talking about the range of tomorrow's headlines that could be written today and stand a painfully reasonable chance of coming true.

I'm sure you could produce your own version of such future headlines in a variety of areas, but here are mine when it comes to Washington's remarkably unwinnable wars, interventions, and conflicts in the Greater Middle East and increasingly [Africa](#).

## What “Victory” Looks Like

Let's start with an event that occurred in Iraq as 2015 ended and generated [headlines](#) that included “victory,” a word Americans haven't often seen in the twenty-first century -- except, of course, in [Trumpian patter](#). (“We're going to win so much -- win after win after win -- that you're going to be begging me: 'Please, Mr. President, let us lose once or twice. We can't stand it any more.' And I'm going to say: 'No way. We're going to keep winning. We're never going to lose. We're never, ever going to lose.'”) I'm talking about the “victory” achieved at Ramadi, a city in al-Anbar Province that Islamic State (IS or ISIL) militants seized from the Iraqi army in May 2015. With the backing of the U.S. Air Force -- there were more than [600 American air strikes](#) in and around Ramadi in the months leading up to that victory -- and with U.S.-trained and U.S.-financed local special ops units [leading the way](#), the Iraqi military did indeed largely take back that intricately booby-trapped and mined city from heavily entrenched IS militants in late December. The news was clearly a relief for the Obama administration and those headlines followed.

And here's what victory turned out to look like: according to the Iraqi defense minister, at least [80%](#) of the city of 400,000 was destroyed. Rubblized. Skeletized. “City” may be what it's still called, but it's hardly an accurate description. According to *New York Times* reporter Ben Hubbard, who [visited](#) Ramadi soon after the “victory,” few

inhabitants remained. Of an Iraqi counterterrorism general there with him, Hubbard wrote:

*“In one neighborhood, he stood before a panorama of wreckage so vast that it was unclear where the original buildings had stood. He paused when asked how residents would return to their homes. ‘Homes?’ he said. ‘There are no homes.’”*

Hubbard also cited the head of the Anbar provincial council as estimating that “rebuilding the city would require \$12 billion.” (Other Iraqi officials put that figure at **\$10 billion**.) That’s money no one has, including an Iraqi government **increasingly strapped** by plummeting oil prices -- and keep in mind that that’s only a single destroyed community. The earlier, smaller victories of the Kurds at **Kobane** and **Sinjar** in Syria, also backed by devastating U.S. air power, destroyed those towns in a similar fashion, as for instance has Bashar al-Assad’s barrel bombing air force and military in parts of the city of Aleppo and in the now thoroughly devastated city of **Homs** in central Syria. The Russians have, of course, entered the fray, too, in the American style, bombing and advising.

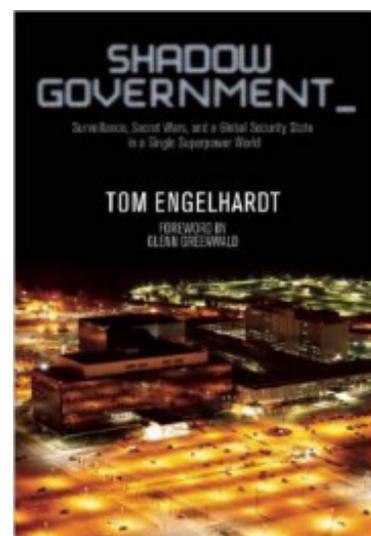
Let’s add one more thing before we write our future headlines. The day after President Obama gave his final **State of the Union** address, Secretary of Defense Ashton Carter **visited** the 101st Airborne Division at Fort Campbell, Kentucky. **Eighteen hundred** of that division’s members are soon to be deployed to Iraq to aid Iraqi military units in their drive to retake parts of their country from the Islamic State. For those future advisers, Carter **elaborated on the president’s plans**, laying out in some detail how he (and presumably Obama) saw the conflict playing out. Favoring the image of the Islamic State as a metastasizing cancer, he said:

*“The ISIL parent tumor has two centers -- Raqqa in Syria, and Mosul in Iraq. ISIL has used its control of these cities and nearby territories as a power base from which to derive considerable financial resources, manpower, and ideological outreach. They constitute ISIL’s military, political, economic, and ideological centers of gravity.*

*“That’s why our campaign plan’s map has got big arrows pointing at both Mosul and Raqqa. We will begin by collapsing ISIL’s control over both of these cities and then engage in elimination operations through other territories ISIL holds in Iraq and Syria.”*

In fact, such a campaign would give “elimination operations” new meaning, since it would clearly involve quite literally eliminating the urban infrastructure of significant parts of the region. Three cities are, in fact, at present targeted: **Fallujah** (population perhaps 300,000), the other major IS-controlled city in al-Anbar Province, Mosul (the second largest city in Iraq, with a population presently estimated at 1 to 1.5 million), and Raqqa, the Syrian “capital” of the Islamic State, now reportedly stuffed with refugees (population 200,000-plus). Put them together and you have a 2016 plan for a U.S.-backed set of campaigns in Iraq and Syria based on the same formula as the taking of Ramadi: massive American air power in support of heavily trained and advised Iraqi special ops forces and army units or, in Syria, Kurdish peshmerga outfits and assorted Kurdish and Syrian rebels. Add in the Islamic State’s urge to turn the urban areas it holds into **giant bombs** and what you have is a plan for the rubblization of yet more cities in the region.

There has, of course, been much talk about an offensive to retake Mosul since relatively small numbers of Islamic State fighters captured the city from tens of thousands of **fleeing Iraqi troops** in June 2014. There was, for instance,



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a highly touted [spring offensive](#) against Mosul that was much discussed in early 2015 but never happened, so it's impossible to be sure that the overstretched, generally [underperforming](#) Iraqi military will even make it to Mosul in 2016 or that there will be any non-American "boots" available to take Raqqa, especially since that city sits well outside any imaginable future Kurdistan. Still, assuming all went "well," we essentially know what the future holds: Ramadi-style "victories."

As a result, the end of the year headline for American/Iraqi/Kurdish/Syrian rebel operations -- adapted from an [infamous 1968 line](#) by an anonymous American officer in Vietnam after U.S. planes had pummeled the provincial capital of Ben Tre -- would be: "We Destroyed the Cities to Save Them."

Based on Ramadi, you could then perhaps offer these "ballpark" (not that any stadiums would be left standing) future estimates for rebuilding: Falluja, \$10 billion; Raqqa, \$7 billion; Mosul, \$20 to \$25 billion. Those are obviously fantasy figures, but the point is that "success" against and "victory" over the Islamic State would undoubtedly leave much of the region a modern Carthage. And who would pay for a new Ramadi, or Mosul, or Fallujah, or Raqqa, no less all of them and more?

Put another way, "victory" would mean that Iraq will have far fewer habitable cities and a far larger number of displaced people whose resettlement will undoubtedly be subject to the ethnic tensions that helped fuel the Islamic State in the first place. This represents a reasonably predictable future, one that should be obvious enough to anyone who took a half-serious look at the situation. It certainly should be obvious to Ashton Carter, as well as to American planners at the Pentagon and in the Obama administration. And yet the planning goes on as if "victory" were a meaningful category under the circumstances.

And here's the thing: you can join the Islamic State in blowing up the physical plant of Syria and parts of Iraq and then eject its fighters from the rubble, but you'll be destroying the means of existence of a vast, increasingly unsettled population. What you may not be able to do in the process is destroy a movement that began in an [American military prison](#) in Iraq and has always been a set of ideas. You may simply create a legend.

### **Unleashing the Special Operators and the Drones**

Now, let's consider another set of potential future headlines linked to present planning and past experience.

Secretary of Defense Carter claims that the U.S. strategy against the Islamic State is focused on creating "sustainable political stability in the region," by which he means not just the battlefields of Iraq and Syria, but all of the Greater Middle East. As he said to the members of the 101st Airborne:

*"Next, let me describe the fight outside of Iraq and Syria. As we work to destroy the parent tumor in Iraq and Syria, we must also recognize that ISIL is metastasizing in areas such as North Africa, Afghanistan, and Yemen. The threat posed by ISIL, and groups like it, is continually evolving, changing focus and shifting location. It requires from us, therefore, a flexible and nimble response with a broad reach."*

For this, he clearly plans to let loose American Special Operations forces not just in Syria but elsewhere on assassination missions against key Islamic State figures or those heading their distant franchises. He's also intent on sending in the drones across the region in "counter-terror operations and strikes on high-value targets" to "act decisively to prevent ISIL affiliates from becoming as great of a threat as the parent tumor itself."

As with the future taking of cities in Iraq and Syria, there is an experiential baseline for such operations across the region. In his book [Kill Chain](#), Andrew Cockburn has called this approach to the enemy "the kingpin strategy." It was first used in the drug wars in Latin America and Central America in the 1990s and then, after 9/11, adapted to the weaponized drone and special operations forces. The idea was to dismantle drug cartels or later terror outfits

from the top down by taking out their leadership figures.

In fact, in both the drug wars and the terror wars, as Cockburn [shows](#), the results of this strategy have been repetitiously calamitous. The drone, for instance, has proven remarkably capable of “eliminating” both the top leadership of terror groups and key “lieutenants” as well as [other influential figures](#) in those organizations -- with the grimmest results: under the pressure of the drones and those special ops raids, such organizations (like the drug cartels before them) simply replaced their dead leaders with often younger and even more aggressive figures, while attacks rose and the groups themselves, instead of folding up, spread across the Greater Middle East and deep into Africa. The drones, bringing with them relatively [widespread](#) “collateral damage,” [including](#) the deaths of significant numbers of [children](#), have [terrorized](#) the societies over which they cruise and so proved an ideal recruitment poster for those spreading terror groups.

Hence, first in the Bush era in a seat-of-the-pants way and then in the Obama years in a [highly organized fashion](#), drone assassination campaigns in Pakistan, Afghanistan, Yemen, Iraq, Syria, Libya, and Somalia killed leadership figures while functionally helping to spread the terror organizations they directed. They have, that is, been engaged not in a war on terror, but in a [war for terror](#). When you look at the expansion of those terror outfits, including the growing numbers of “franchises” of the Islamic State, it should be obvious that, from special ops missions to drone assassinations, from full-scale invasions to the destruction of cities, the [14-plus years](#) of varied American strategies and military tactics have repetitively contributed to one horror after another, sucking much of the region into the vortex.

What’s striking when you listen to Secretary of Defense Carter is that, obvious as this may be, none of it seems to truly penetrate in Washington. Otherwise how do you explain the lack of any serious recalibration of American actions, the only debate being between those in the Obama administration, including the president, who favor a version of mission creep and their Republican critics who favor doing more in a bigger way? In other words, in 2016 we’re clearly going to witness further rounds of the utterly familiar with -- somehow -- the expectation that something different will happen. Since that’s not likely, for the next set of future headlines just reach into the familiar past, substituting, when necessary, the future terror kingpin’s name: “[AQAP \[al-Qaeda on the Arabian Peninsula\] announces death of \[fill in name\] in U.S. drone strike](#),” “[U.S.: ISIS no. 2 killed in U.S. drone strike in Iraq](#),” “[Army elite Delta Force kills top ISIS official, \[fill in name\], in daring Syria raid](#),” “[Pentagon says senior al-Qaeda leader killed in drone strike](#),” and so on more or less *ad infinitum*.

## The Arc of Instability

Recently, with Ashton Carter’s strategy for “stability” on my mind, I caught a phrase in a news report that I hadn’t heard for quite a while. A journalist, perhaps on NPR, was discussing the recent al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) [terror attack](#) on a hotel in Burkina Faso, a previously relatively stable country in West Africa, where [at least 30 died](#), mainly foreigners. He spoke of a spreading “arc of instability” in the region.

Back in the early years of the century, officials of the Bush administration and supportive neocons regularly used that phrase to describe the Greater Middle East, from Pakistan to North Africa. Strangely enough, it disappeared in the post-Iraqi invasion years and remained largely absent in the Obama years as the disastrous Libyan intervention, [presidentially orchestrated](#) drone assassination campaigns, and other actions helped further transform the Greater Middle East into a genuine “arc of instability.”

Today, in a way that would have been unimaginable back in 2002-2003, the region is filled with failing or failed states from Afghanistan and Syria to Libya, Yemen, and Mali. While Iraq may not quite be a failed state, it is no longer exactly a country either, but something like a [tripartite](#) entity. And so it goes, and so it evidently will go if the U.S., as in 2015, drops another [23,000 bombs](#) and thousands of additional munitions on the region -- or far more, as seems likely under the mission-creep pressure of the war with the Islamic State.

We can’t, of course, know just what countries will fail next. However, it’s safe to assume that, as long as the Obama

strategy -- and the Hillary Clinton or Ted Cruz or Donald Trump or Marco Rubio one that may follow -- involves more (or much more) of the same, more (or much more) of the same is likely to happen. As a result, similar predictable headlines will appear, as countries dissolve in various ways and the Islamic State, groups like al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, or newly founded terror outfits gain footholds amid the chaos. In that case, you only have to look into the recent past for headlines-to-come and adapt them slightly: "[ISIS Is Building 'Little Nests' in \[name of country here\]](#), U.S. Defense Secretary Warns," "[ISIS Is Gaining Ground in \[name of country here\]](#), Competing with al-Qaeda," "[Islamic State Gained Strength in \[name of country\]](#) by Co-opting Local Jihadists," and so on.

Amid the grimly predictable, there are, of course, many unknowns. Above all, we have no idea what it means at this point in history to turn a region, city by city, country by country, into something like a vast failed state and then continue to bomb the rubble. How do we begin to imagine what could emerge from the ruins of such a failed region in such a world, from an arc of instability far vaster than anything we have contemplated since World War II? I wouldn't want to predict the headlines that could someday emerge from that situation, but whatever surprises are in store for us, the mere prospect of such a future should make your blood run cold.

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