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Stabilizing the Fertile Crescent after the Fall of the Caliphate

In October 2006, al-Qaeda in Iraq consolidated its alliances and declared itself a state—the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI). Despite the fact that ISI created ministries and other trappings of a state, it never controlled territory in a manner that states do. As such, the world mostly ignored its claim of statehood. In 2011, as American forces withdrew from Iraq and as Syria descended into civil war, the Islamic State of Iraq gradually took control of territory in both of those countries. In April 2013, ISI changed its name to the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) to convey the fact that it held territory on both sides of the border. Still, the world mostly ignored its existence. By June 2014, such willful ignorance could no longer be maintained in the wake of the blitzkrieg offensive that ISIS blazed across northern Iraq. With the fall of Mosul, Iraq's second most important city, and the ensuing collapse of the Iraqi military, the United States finally was forced to take notice and abandon its plans for withdrawal. However, by the time American forces began to reengage, ISIS ruled vast sections of Iraq and Syria in the manner

typical of a territorial state. It collected taxes, ran schools, collected garbage, and maintained the all-important monopoly on the use of force. ISIS's statehood created a situation which was new for counter-terrorism strategists, and the military operations against ISIS often resembled conventional state-on-state warfare—with front lines, battles for cities, and the massing of troops—rather than traditional counter-terrorism operations.

When the United States began those operations in 2014, its stated intention was to “degrade and destroy” ISIS. Since then, a diverse array of forces has worked tirelessly to liberate key territories in Iraq and Syria from ISIS's Caliphate. Now, in the summer of 2018, ISIS's Caliphate has largely been dismantled as a territorial entity. However, the group is far from destroyed, and its ability to maneuver is much improved as it reverts to an insurgency. What's more, there is very little to prevent yet another non-state armed group from retaking the very same lands that ISIS once held. Accordingly, American diplomacy,

military strategy, and intelligence collection likely will focus on Iraq and Syria for many years to come. Thus, the question for policymakers is how the U.S. can prevent non-state armed groups from regaining a territorial foothold, further destabilizing these territories, and ultimately threatening U.S. interests in the region. Relatedly, the question of what to do about the likes of al-Qaeda and ISIS even if they do not hold territory remains equally pressing.

A post-territorial counter-terrorism strategy that provides post-conflict stabilization and impairs jihadis from operating in this theater is needed. This strategy will have to blend kinetic, cyber, political, and economic toolsets on the local, regional, and international levels. It also will need to reassess the jihadi threat emanating from the Fertile Crescent. This Summer 2018 special issue of *Orbis*, “Stabilizing the Fertile Crescent after the Fall of the Caliphate,” is designed both to provide a framework for thinking about the threat of terrorism emanating from the Fertile Crescent now that ISIS’s Caliphate is being undone and to provide concrete policy recommendations to establish a tenable politico-economic status quo. As such, it brings together a mix of practitioners and academics to examine a wide range of topics at the local, state, transnational, and international levels.

The first article by Colin P. Clarke and Assaf Moghadam diagnoses the current state of the global jihad movement and offers reflections on its likely trajectory. Clarke and Moghadam argue that while the global jihad has suffered a temporary setback due to the decline of the Islamic State, the movement still benefits from al-Qaeda’s regeneration; its ongoing ideological appeal; and its structural decentralization.

By transforming into an increasingly multipolar entity, the global jihad movement poses several challenges for counterterrorism in the future, including dealing with a complex movement structure, radicalization, socio-political disenfranchisement, the counter-response of societies targeted by jihadist violence, and technological challenges.

Relatedly, Mia Bloom and Chelsea L. Daymon’s article looks at ISIS’s retreat to a virtual Caliphate as a result of its loss of territory. For Bloom and Daymon, despite ISIS’s territorial setbacks, its virtual Caliphate shows no signs of diminishment. With social media platforms being increasingly policed, the messaging application Telegram remains ISIS’s key platform for disseminating propaganda and recruiting new members. Bloom and Daymon are able to show how ISIS utilizes Telegram to manipulate an environment rich with addictive properties, creating online spaces that encourage group identity, shared opinions, and dominant ideologies, while exploiting an individual’s need to be a part of the group. Their assessment of the caliber of threat ISIS’s use of Telegram poses for the future should inform policymakers’ strategies toward the cyber-sphere.

In the two articles that follow, Frank Gunter and Samuel Helfont focus on Iraq, why it fell, its current predicament, and what needs to be done to achieve stability. In Gunter’s estimation, Iraq still faces the same economic challenges that contributed to the rise of al-Qaeda and ISIS. He posits that unless these challenges are resolved, the likelihood of future political stability in this pivotal country is low. Extremely high levels of unemployment and underemployment among Iraq’s youth,

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