



A More Forward Role for the Gulf States? Combating Terrorism at Home and Abroad

April 2018

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Abstract: Though a vast coalition of some 75 countries has retaken much of the territory once comprising ISIS's Caliphate, the threat to the Fertile Crescent is far from over. Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and a number of the other Gulf States represent a few of the many regional and global stakeholders currently engaged in this arena in the name of stability and other more personal interests. This article will explore the motivations, capabilities, and activities of the Gulf States vis-à-vis ISIS, the Fertile Crescent, and the larger threat that groups like ISIS represent more broadly.

This article is part of a special project conducted by the Foreign Policy Research Institute, titled: "After the Caliphate: Reassessing the Jihadi Threat and Stabilizing the Fertile Crescent," which includes a book, a thematic issue of Orbis: FPRI's Journal of World Affairs (Summer 2018), and a series of podcasts. Each element of the project can be found here: <https://www.fpri.org/research/after-the-caliphate-project/>. The author is the Project Lead.

The Islamic State and its myriad of provinces scattered across the Middle East are, for the most part, no more. And while Tikrit, Mosul, Raqqa, Sirte, Sinai, and other key cities were overtaken by this brutal enemy with unanticipated ease and speed, the combined efforts of a diverse coalition of countries have now "liberated" much of the territory that comprised ISIS's state. In 2014 at the group's apogee, its founders grandly proclaimed a new Islamic Caliphate. But now, that Caliphate has been reduced to a territorially dismantled, low-level insurgency. And yet, dismantled does not mean eliminated. Not only are these liberated cities

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Summer 2018 | 1

HELFONT

destroyed almost beyond recognition, but they also remain susceptible to conquering and pillaging at the hands the next, equally motivated actor.

What is needed now is a pathway to stability; and from stability, one hopes that rehabilitation may follow. The dire need for stability goes beyond the Fertile Crescent to the regional and the global arenas. In that vein, this article seeks to explore the role of the Gulf States in contributing to, and in some cases undermining, stability in the Fertile Crescent. It will examine why the Gulf States joined the fight against ISIS; which states in particular are involved and what motivates them; what these states are doing at home in the realm of counterterrorism that have direct and indirect impacts on the Fertile Crescent; and what they are doing in Iraq and Syria. Through this assessment of the motivations, capabilities, and activities of one of the region's most powerful actors vis-à-vis the lands that once comprised ISIS's Caliphate, U.S. policymakers will be better equipped to understand this imperiled locality, who is operating within it, why, and how to adapt American strategy accordingly.¹

What is Driving the Gulf States?

The Gulf States have become deeply invested in the defeat of ISIS in Iraq and Syria, but even more importantly, in the larger region. This investment is borne out of a strong desire for regional stability and security and its natural correlate, domestic stability and security. Since 2014, ISIS has carried out a series of deadly attacks in Saudi Arabia and Kuwait and attempted attacks in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Bahrain. These ever-present security threats have motivated a number of Gulf States to take steps to protect themselves and their interests at home and in the Fertile Crescent. Beyond the threat posed by non-state actors, there is the matter of the Islamic Republic of Iran. Iran has gone to great lengths to penetrate every corner of the region—a reality that many of the Gulf States cannot abide. The historic Arab-Persian rivalry, the Sunni-Shi'a rivalry, enduring disputes over resources and territory, and even basic principles of balance of power are at the root of this almost region-wide rejection of Iranian influence. Consequently, the main fear now in Iraq and Syria is that the territorial defeat of ISIS will translate into territorial gains for Iran because of how successful Tehran has been in embedding itself in these two countries (in Baghdad through the Shi'a-dominated government and its Popular Mobilization Forces; and in Syria through its proxy Hezbollah and its military and matériel support of Bashar al-Assad). One cannot overemphasize the degree to which this fear motivates Saudi Arabia and others to engage in this conflict.

Unsurprisingly, each of these states has a different calculus behind their efforts to dismantle ISIS's Caliphate and degrade ISIS's capabilities. Generally

¹ This article will rely heavily on the language used by the Gulf States to describe their own counter-ISIS strategy, alongside a number of American assessments and analytical pieces. The purpose is to understand how they see the threat and what they think they should do about it, not how well they are doing or if they should be doing something different. American strategy must take into account both intention and action with regard to other actors in this conflict.

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