

Variations on a Common Theme: Contemporary Approaches to International Stabilisation Efforts

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Variations on a Common Theme: Contemporary Approaches to International Stabilisation Efforts

Executive Summary

- Over the past years, there has been a rapid expansion of stabilisation activities. Widely seen as offering a more realistic and less costly option to address the complex realities of state failure, stabilisation has emerged as a new platform for rethinking engagement in fragile settings.
- In the MENA region as well, there has been a growing appetite for stabilisation. With an interest in advancing regional stability in the MENA region, Arab Gulf States in particular have shown increasing desire to develop the instruments they need to support state-building, peace-building and development activities in conflict-affected countries across the region.
- Yet, despite its popularity, the conceptual and programmatic boundaries of stabilisation continue to be surprisingly elastic both in form and content. Indeed, it is still largely unclear what stabilisation is, what it is intended to achieve, and when it begins or ends.
- To better understand what makes stabilisation distinctive from competing concepts and practices, it seems useful to look at a variety of international attempts to build the conceptual and institutional toolkit for stabilisation activities. In particular, this paper reviews four Euro-Atlantic countries with experience leading stabilisation responses (the United Kingdom, Canada, the United States and France). Stabilisation practices in major intergovernmental bodies (European Union, the United Nations, and NATO) are also examined.
- At its core, stabilisation involves the mobilisation of a combination of military, political, development and humanitarian resources and actions. To make these combinations work in practice, most governments have opted for a whole-of-government approach, developing various interagency structures and coordination mechanisms to plan and manage stabilisation activities.
- Looking across governmental experience reviewed in this paper, this process has typically faced three primary barriers: 1) a strategic gap; 2) a civilian gap; and 3) a cultural gap. While effective leadership seems key to address possible gaps in strategic oversight, the civilian and cultural gaps require a more sustained engagement across government.
- Along with these institutional innovations, governments have also issued a variety of documents to inform strategic and operational choices they make with regard to stabilisation activities. In most cases, however, major doctrinal documents produced on this subject remain vague about the scope and objectives.
- At the heart of the problem lies the disagreement about whether stabilisation should be defined more narrowly - as the management of acute crises - or more broadly, portraying state fragility as the main challenge, therefore causing a considerable amount of confusion about the nature of the task and the goals to be achieved.

- Yet, following the Iraq and Afghanistan experience, there is today a distinct trend towards more realistic, less ambitious goals for stabilisation activities. In this approach, stabilisation is not a conflict prevention method, nor is it the antidote to long-term state fragility but the exceptional toolkit to build resilience and pave the way for longer-term recovery.
- Even a narrow approach, however, cannot afford to be based on short-term perspectives or rigid timelines. In fact, there is no predetermined period for stabilisation – it can range from months to years. Success in stabilisation missions thus largely depends on the level of political will and investment necessary for a planned and (sometimes) prolonged effort.
- Similarly, Arab Gulf States could also consider training a cadre of government employees working on stabilisation issues or in conflict-affected countries. This could be complemented by the establishment of a staff roster to ensure that stabilisation operations are timely as well as staffed by personnel with relevant skills, training and experience. Importantly, training content will need to address planning and operational requirements in a range of different instability contexts.
- In addition, stabilisation efforts must be rigorously evaluated. Lessons from previous operations need to be learned and applied in future endeavours. As such, it is worth highlighting the importance of developing robust measures of effectiveness for stabilisation programmes.

How Arab Gulf States Can Support Regional Stabilisation Efforts:

- Arab Gulf States with experience contributing to regional stabilisation efforts could consider exploring ways to develop the institutional designs required to prepare for, design, execute, monitor and evaluate these activities.
- While in principle there is no single “best” solution – each whole-of-government approach being shaped by a government’s particular political culture, legal framework and financial resources – the focus should be on establishing policies and processes that would help achieve better coordination between defence, security, diplomacy and development.
- Finally, it is crucial that Arab Gulf States rigorously define their conception of stabilisation, including the scope and objectives of these activities. In particular, this should help clarify what stabilisation efforts will aim to achieve and where these efforts are geographically focused.
- As such, considering lessons learned from past stabilisation missions, Arab Gulf Countries could consider adopting a narrower approach focused on efforts to move on from situations of acute crises and large-scale violence in conflict-affected countries. In the MENA region, this would currently include countries such as Yemen, Libya, Syria, Somalia, Iraq.

Introduction

There has been a rapid expansion of stabilisation activities. In contexts as different as Mali, Mexico, and Afghanistan, stabilisation has emerged in recent years as a new “platform for rethinking engagement in fragile settings”.¹ Predicated on the idea that development and security are mutually reinforcing, stabilisation efforts have striven to promote legitimate political authority in conflict-affected countries by using a range of integrated civilian and military instruments with the aim to reduce violence, give people basic livelihoods, and prepare for longer-term recovery. As a mode of intervention, it has been rooted in the belief that peace and stability can be best achieved by tackling “structural sources of conflict through the promotion of responsive institutions, human rights, rule of law, accountable security services and broad-based social and economic development”.²

Yet, in the context of post-Iraq and Afghanistan intervention fatigue, at least in the West, stabilisation also appears to be increasingly conceived as a transition from more ambitious peace and state building operations of the past two decades to smaller-scale programs with “targeted security and development packages”.³ For Western governments in particular, stabilisation has been widely seen as offering a more realistic and less costly option to address the complex realities of state fragility.

As such, while an uneasy consensus has emerged in relation to the conceptual and operational parameters of stabilisation, it is still largely unclear what stabilisation is, what it is intended to achieve, and when it begins or ends.⁴ Notably, there is still disagreement over whether stabilisation is a set of activities, a strategic objective or a combination of the two, thus generating confusion and exacerbating the core challenges of coordinating development, defence and diplomacy.⁵

Despite this lack of clarity, the appeal of stabilisation has been undeniable, with the widespread adoption and institutionalization of the idea. Indeed, in recent years, many national governments as well as regional and international organizations, have invested in the development of a range of institutional designs to plan and manage stabilisation. They have similarly been busy producing conceptual documents and doctrine on stabilisation to guide their policies.

In the MENA region as well, there has been a growing appetite for stabilisation. Indeed, the increasing reticence of Western states to engage in complex military operations has contributed to the emergence of new regional stabilisation actors. With important resources and an interest in advancing regional stability in the MENA region and beyond, the Arab Gulf States in particular have shown desire to develop their own tailored policies and approaches to stabilisation.

Against this backdrop, this paper looks at a variety of relevant international attempts to build the conceptual and institutional toolkit for stabilisation activities. It first provides an overview of what makes stabilisation distinctive from competing concepts and practices. It then reviews various institutional models and bureaucratic mechanisms developed in four Euro-Atlantic countries with experience leading stabilisation responses (the United Kingdom, Canada, the United States and France). The institutionalisation (or lack thereof) of stabilisation practices in major intergovernmental bodies (European Union, the United Nations, and NATO) is also examined.

¹ Robert Muggah, ed., *Stabilization Operations, Security and Development. States of Fragility* (Routledge, 2014), 3.

² Steven A. Zyck, Sultan Barakat, and Sean Deely, “The Evolution of Stabilisation Concepts and Praxis”, in Muggah, ed., *op.cit.*, 15.

³ Ethan B. Kapstein, “Aid And Stabilization in Afghanistan”: What Do the Data Say?”, United States Institute of Peace, June 2017.

⁴ Robert Muggah, “The United Nations Turns to Stabilization”. IPI Global Observatory, December 5, 2014.

⁵ Zyck, Barakat, and Deely, *op. cit.*, 17.

In addition, the paper assesses how stabilisation has been approached, highlighting efforts made by national governments, as well as regional and international organisations, to define the conceptual boundaries of their stabilisation activities. It finally identifies current challenges, along with possible solutions, in order to lay out priorities, options and ways forward that together could support ongoing attempts by new actors involved in stabilisation efforts, in particular in the MENA region, to develop their own conception of stabilisation and build the instruments they need to build state resilience and promote peace and security across the region.

1. What is Stabilisation?

What is stabilisation and what does it include? Despite its popularity, stabilisation has proven to be an elusive concept,⁶ sitting uneasily at the intersection of competing definitions, approaches and practices.⁷ Most notably, the ways in which military force and development assistance are expected to translate into support for domestic authorities bear a striking resemblance to counter insurgency (COIN) practices carried out throughout the past century, as well as to aspects of the colonial and post-colonial nation-building enterprise.⁸ In recent military operations in Afghanistan and Iraq as well, stabilisation has often been defined within COIN's doctrine sequential steps of "clear, hold and build" – e.g. once the military forces have "cleared" an area of insurgents, the area would then be stabilised – or "held" – and "built" with longer term recovery and development programmes aimed at fostering local resilience and legitimacy.⁹

Yet, in recent years, the scope of stabilisation activities has greatly expanded. Moving away from mid-conflict, military-centric responses akin to counter-insurgency, stabilisation operations of the past decade have come to encompass a wide range of policies and practices intended to "fix" conflict-affected countries. They have also drawn on a wider variety of actors – from police personnel and specialists to urban planners, relief workers, development experts, diplomats and others –, and have often entailed a wider transformation in local patterns of governance than the more traditional civilian-led activities that supported COIN.

Similarly, the concept of stabilisation is often paired with "reconstruction". While the distinction between the two concepts is not always instructive,¹⁰ it is nonetheless worth highlighting the main key differences. First, stabilisation activities are designed to address short-term priorities and focused on contested or recently secured areas, while development is regarded as a more long-term endeavour and focused on secure areas. Second, while projects and programmes can be similar, they are likely to be undertaken for different reasons. Indeed, stabilisation and reconstruction clearly differ on intent. As a recent Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR) report put it: "a development program might build a school because education triggers a process that leads to greater long-term prosperity and development – educated children are more likely to grow up to be healthier and more qualified to administer government, succeed in business, and help grow the economy. In contrast, a stabilization program might build a school to trigger a process that leads to improved security: The school would demonstrate the government is working on behalf of the community, the local population would come to prefer government services over the return of insurgents, and insurgents would lose control over territory (they previously held)".¹¹

As such, while development work usually requires a degree of insulation from political dynamics combined with clear frameworks of operation to guarantee both effectiveness and accountability of more longer-term objectives, stabilisation programmes, for their part, necessitate both direct political control and maximum flexibility.¹² In practice, however, using both terms together has often been seen by government agencies as a way to get the flexibility required to carry out a wide range of projects, from removing rubble and de-mining activities to building hospitals.¹³

⁶ Saskia Van Genugten, "Stabilisation in the Contemporary Middle East and North Africa: Different Dimensions of an Elusive Concept", Emirates Diplomatic Academy, March 2018.

⁷ Stephanie Blair and Ann Fitz-Gerald, "Stabilisation and Stability Operations: A Literature Review, Draft Paper, 30 June 2009, 3.

⁸ Sultan Barakat, "Stabilisation", GSDRC, no. 47, University of Birmingham, July 2016, 1.

⁹ "Stabilization: Lessons from the U.S. Experience in Afghanistan", Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, May 2018, 6.

¹⁰ "Stabilization: Lessons from the U.S. Experience in Afghanistan", op. cit., 6.

¹¹ Ibid, 5.

¹² Philipp Rotmann, "Towards a Realistic and Responsible Idea of Stabilisation", *Stability: International Journal of Security and Development*, 5(1), 2016, 9.

¹³ Ibid.

Part of the same overlapping continuum, the distinction between humanitarian and stabilisation response is also often blurred. According to the OECD, humanitarian assistance is “short-term help that saves lives, alleviates suffering, and maintains human dignity through the provision of shelter, food and water, hygiene, and urgent health care”.¹⁴ While definition varies, the essential distinction between humanitarian aid and stabilisation is that the former is based strictly on need, while stabilisation is an inherently political activity, with assistance primarily intended to bolster governing capacity (e.g. the ability of authorities to deliver services) and legitimacy.¹⁵ As such, stabilisation remains flexible on design and implementation, and does not predetermine the sectors or means involved: it gives no a priori preference to justice reform, security sector governance and national and/or localised ceasefires and peace talks, arguing instead for a “continued focus on diplomacy”.¹⁶ So, whereas humanitarian responses are universal and non-judgmental, stabilisation responses come with a political agenda.

Within these broad parameters, national governments and intergovernmental bodies have invested in the development of a range of bureaucratic mechanisms and institutional designs needed to plan and manage these activities.

2. Institutionalising Stabilisation

Stabilisation requires pooling together a range of military, development, diplomatic and humanitarian resources and actions. To make this possible, several governments with experience leading stabilisation responses have opted for “integrated”, “comprehensive” or “whole-of-government” approaches.¹⁷ In most cases, they have developed multi-agency bureaucratic units and funding mechanisms to lay out strategies, identify cross-sector priorities, and integrate civilian and military response capabilities.¹⁸

This section reviews different institutional models of inter-agency structures and coordination mechanisms established to plan and implement stabilisation. Looking across different governmental experiences, a variety of institutional models can be identified, ranging from the more integrated model adopted by the United Kingdom to the more decentralized and broadly voluntarily set-ups based on cross-departmental and inter-ministerial cooperation established by the French government, with both Canada and the United States standing mid-way between. The section also reviews bureaucratic designs developed by some major intergovernmental bodies to manage stabilisation.

2.1. The United Kingdom

The United Kingdom has pioneered the integrated approach, setting up early on a range of joint institutional and decision-making mechanisms for its stabilisation activities. Operating under the National Security Council umbrella, this includes the Stabilisation Unit (SU) and the Conflict, Stability and Security Fund (CSSF). Established in 2007, the SU is a cross-government¹⁹ advisory unit supporting the country’s efforts to tackle instability in

¹⁴ “Humanitarian Assistance”, OECD, 2016, quoted by Shelly Culbertson and Linda Robinson, “Making Victory Count After Defeating ISIS. Stabilization Challenges in Mosul and Beyond”, Rand, 2017, 8.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Robert A. Muggah and Steven Zyck, “Preparing Stabilisation for 21st Century Security Challenges”, *Stability: International Journal of Security and Development*, 4(1): 54, 2015, 3.

¹⁷ According to the OECD’s definition, a whole-of-government approach is “one where a government actively uses formal and/or informal networks across the different agencies within that government to coordinate the design and implementation of the range of interventions that the government’s agencies will be making in order to increase the effectiveness of those interventions in achieving the desired objectives”. “Whole of Government Approaches to Fragile States”, OECD, 2006, 14.

¹⁸ Sarah Collinson, Samir Elhawary, and Robert Muggah, “States of Fragility: Stabilisation and its Implications for Humanitarian Action. HPG Working Paper, ODI, May 2010, 9.

fragile and conflict-affected states. It employs around 75 staff from across the government, and manages, since 2010, the Civilian Stabilisation Group (CSG), which consists of civilian experts, civil servants, and serving UK police officers, who are available for deployment to fragile and conflict-affected countries – in as few as 24 hours for certain categories of staff.²⁰

The SU's role is predominantly focused on the professionalisation of operational work. Its responsibilities include i) providing the link between civil, military and police efforts to build stability overseas; ii) facilitating cross-government working and lesson-learning in planning for, and responding to, conflict; iii) capturing and sharing lessons and examples of best practices on stabilisation work and; iv) responding to requests from UK government departments, embassies and country offices for support to fragile and conflict-affected states.²¹ In recent years, the SU has provided advice or assistance to over 70 countries, including Afghanistan, Sudan, and Iraq, in particular in the sectors of security and justice.²²

Since 2015, the SU is funded through the Conflict, Stability and Security Fund (CSSF), which has replaced the previous Conflict Pool.²³ Whereas its predecessor was jointly controlled by the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, the Ministry of Defence, and the Department for International Development, the CSSF brings together a wider range of actors (including the Home Office, Ministry of Justice and National Crime Agency) with the aim of ensuring a “fuller integration and coordination of instruments under cross-government regional and country strategies”.²⁴ The SU also provides support and advice to the Fund through training, guidance, technical assistance and lessons events.

Priorities for the CSSF are set by the government's National Security Council, made up of senior ministers, including the Prime Minister, who chairs it. The Deputy National Security Advisor is the Senior Responsible Officer for the Fund as a whole.²⁵ Each department is then accountable for its CSSF spending. For the fiscal year 2018, the Fund has been allocated £1.28 billion, which includes both Official Development Assistance (ODA) spend and non-ODA spend. Nearly half of all the CSSF's ODA allocation is spent in countries classed as having high fragility.²⁶ In 2017, the five largest CSSF country programmes were: “Afghanistan (£90 million), Syria (£64 million), Somalia (£33.5 million), Jordan (£25.3 million) and Lebanon (£24 million)”.²⁷

2.2. Canada

In Canada, the whole-of-government approach to international stabilisation efforts emerged in the mid-2000s as part of the country's promotion of the 3D approach (Diplomacy, Defence, Development) to conflict and post-conflict situations. The main institutional development has been the establishment in 2005 of the Stabilization and Reconstruction Task Force (START) in the Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade (renamed, in 2015, Global Affairs Canada).

¹⁹ Philipp Rotmann and Lea Steinacker, “Stabilization: Doctrine, Organization and Practice”. Global Public Policy Institute, 2013, 12.

²⁰ <https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/stabilisation-unit/about/recruitment>, consulted in August 2018.

²¹ <https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/stabilisation-unit/about>, consulted in June 2018

²² Ibid. By contrast, the Stabilisation Unit does not play a direct role in project management and implementation, despite individual staff members being occasionally sent as experts to crisis countries. Project monitoring is the responsibility of staff in the relevant department in the respective embassy and is often local staff. Rotmann and Steinacker, *op.cit.*, 14.

²³ The Conflict Pool was set up in 2001, as a way to “fund conflict prevention, stabilisation and peacekeeping activities that meet the UK government's conflict prevention priorities as set out in the Building Stability Overseas Strategy”. The funds available through the Conflict Pool were £180 million in 2014–15. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/conflict-pool>, consulted in August 2018.

²⁴ Conflict, Stability and Security Fund: Annual Report 2017/18”, FCO, July 2018.

²⁵ “Conflict, Stability and Security Fund: An Overview”, FCO, May 2018. The previous decision-making forum for the Conflict pool, the Building Stability Overseas Board, is also been replaced by a new programme Boards under the leadership of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office.

²⁶ “Conflict, Stability and Security Fund: Annual Report 2017/18”, *op. cit.*

²⁷ Ibid.

START initially assembled several government departments including the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA, merged into the Department of Foreign Affairs in 2013), the Department of National Defence (DND), the Department of Justice (DOJ), the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP).²⁸ In 2005, the federal government also set up the Global Peace and Security Fund (GPSF), with a budget of around CAD100 million per year. Managed by START, GPSF has been primarily used to deliver high-impact programming in a number of fragile settings, including Afghanistan, Haiti, Sudan, Lebanon, Colombia, the West Bank and Gaza.²⁹ Managed by the Director General of the Stabilization and Reconstruction Task Force Bureau and linked to the Office of the Assistant Deputy Minister for International Security, START's strategic direction was set by the START Advisory Board, an interdepartmental oversight body which also included the Privy Council Office, the Canadian Border Services Agency (CBSA), and the Correctional Services Canada (CSC).

In addition to programming, inter-agency coordination and policy development, START was also designed to be a centre of excellence for operational contribution in fragile contexts, working as an information and knowledge hub for the government within the broader 3D approach.³⁰ Similarly, inside the Foreign Ministry, the Task Force has provided support to the regional departments, including technical crosscutting knowledge "in situations where, on its own, the country desk would be overtaxed".³¹

In 2016, the Canadian government established the Peace and Stabilisation Operations Program (PSOP), replacing both START and the GPSF, in an attempt to enhance the government's response to "emerging and on-going situations of violent conflict and state fragility (...) in a coordinated, whole-of-government manner". It remains however unclear whether the new program will provide any additional capacity as it only marginally modifies START's mandate and maintains its baseline funding at a similar level (roughly CAD150-million a year).³² For the moment, the only noticeable change comes from the addition of an early warning system intended to help the Canadian government engage more constructively in conflict prevention activities.³³

2.3. The United States

Since 2012, the coordination of US Government actions in crisis- and conflict-affected countries is mandated to the Department of State's Bureau of Conflict and Stabilization Operations (CSO).

Part of the "J family" in the State Department (e.g. the crosscutting departments which report to the Under Secretary for Civilian Security, Democracy, and Human Rights), the CSO has replaced the former Office of Coordination and Reconstruction and Stabilisation (S/CRS, established in 2004), but has received fewer resources and lost authority on the reconstruction mandate.³⁴ Its ability to coordinate civilian stabilisation activity is also weakened by the fact that S/CRS is widely seen to have failed to achieve its objectives – a reputation which CSO has had difficulty to escape.³⁵ In this context, the regional desks continue to be the focal point for stabilisation in the State Department, leading on policy development and interagency coordination.³⁶

²⁸ Collinson, Elhawary, and Muggah, op. cit., 9.

²⁹ <http://international.gc.ca/gac-amc/publications/evaluation/2018/start-gpsf.aspx?lang=eng>

³⁰ Rotmann and Steinacker, op. cit., 17.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Thomas Juneau, "New Peacekeeping Plan a Missed Opportunity for Canada", The Globe and Mail, August 26, 2016. Overall, PSOPs have three core responsibilities: 1-Leadership on stabilisation and fragile states policy; 2-Support coordinated responses by the Government of Canada to conflicts and crises abroad; 3-Design and deliver catalytic stabilisation initiatives. "Peace and Stabilization Operations Program". http://international.gc.ca/world-monde/issues_development-enjeux_developpement/response_conflict-reponse_conflicts/psop.aspx?lang=eng, consulted in June 2018.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ In 2016, CSO personnel included 160 Civil Service Officers, Foreign Service Officers, US military detailees and contractors. Wittkowsky and Witkamp, op. cit., 2.

³⁵ Rotmann and Steinacker, op. cit., 24.

³⁶ Ibid.

In any case, US stabilisation activities continue to be effectively dominated by the Department of Defence (DoD), in spite of limited political inclination or DoD desire to lead interagency, government-wide efforts on crisis response and stabilisation.³⁷ As a result, responses towards fragile and conflict-affected countries in the US have remained fragmented, with government stakeholders operating in silos.

In parallel, the US Government has attempted to build an extensive staff roster system related to stabilisation and reconstruction activities. In 2008, S/CRS established the Civilian Response Corps (CRC), with an initial funding of around US\$75 million. The intent was to develop a strong civilian response capability within three readiness categories (active component, standby component, and reserve corps).³⁸ However, problems developed with the CRC almost immediately³⁹ and, in 2011, the CSO stopped funding the active component of the programme and opted instead for a model in which civilian experts would be available on call. The CSO has also established the Peace Process Support Network, consisting of 37 leading NGOs and academic institutions, as well as the Stabilization Leaders Forum, a group of eight governments with experience in stabilisation activities (See Box 1).

Box 1: The Stabilisation Leaders Forum

The Stabilisation Leaders Forum (SLF) brings together leadership and working-level staff from countries involved in stabilisation efforts. SLF was launched in 2013 by the US Department of State's Bureau of Conflict and Stabilisation Operations (CSO) and the UK's Stabilisation Unit, and provides a framework for member countries to help establish and strengthen relationships, enhance information and knowledge sharing, coordinate efforts, and improve mechanisms and actions to prevent and respond to conflict.

In particular, SLF has identified three objectives as key areas: first, supporting peace processes and prevent atrocities, in particular through the development of an early warning and action working group to help prevent, lessen or end conflicts before atrocities occur; second, promoting information-sharing and best practices; and third, ensuring safety of experts in the field.

The SLF members countries are: Austria, Canada, Denmark, France, Germany, the Netherlands, the United Kingdom, and the United States.⁴⁰

³⁷ Rotmann, 2016, op. cit., 4. Also, Renanah Miles, "The (Many) Hurdles to U.S. Stabilizations Operations", Foreign Policy Essay, February 2, 2014.

³⁸ "Stabilization: Lessons from the U.S. Experience in Afghanistan", op. cit., 54. The active component was expected to include 250 federal employees, spread across eight participating departments and agencies and available for deployment overseas in as few as 48 hours. The standby response would have gathered 2000 current federal employees, in the same eight departments and agencies, deployable within 30-45 days, whereas the reserve would have been made of around 2000 civilians from the private sector, as well as state and local governments, able to deploy for stabilisation and reconstruction missions.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ "Stabilization Leaders Forum", Fact Sheet, Bureau of Conflict and Stabilization Operations. US Department of State, <https://www.state.gov/j/cso/releases/2017/268539.htm>, consulted in May 2018.

2.4. France

In France, the practical and political emphasis on stabilisation is recent. It first emerged in the wake of the country's 2013 intervention in Mali and it started to receive greater traction following the adoption in August 2017 of the 3D approach by President Macron, a move aimed at coordinating the French government's response to conflicts and crises in the Sahel region and elsewhere.

The institutional expression of France's stabilisation approach remains limited to the establishment, in 2014, of a small Stabilisation Unit within the Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs' Crisis and Support Centre (CDCS). The Unit consists of nine staff members who coordinate actions supporting democratic governance and civil society in crisis and post-crisis countries in liaison with French embassies, international technical experts, international organisations, banks, NGOs, operators and foundations.⁴¹

As such, in the event of a crisis abroad, inter-agency coordination is for the moment limited to broadly voluntary liaison mechanisms between the CDCS and other government departments, including the Ministry of Defence's Operations Planning and Conduct Centre (CPCO), the Secretariat for Defence and National Security (SGDSN), the Ministry of Interior's Operational Centre for Inter-ministerial Monitoring of Crises (COGIC), the Ministry of Health's Public Establishment for Health Emergency Preparation and Response (EPRUS), and the French Development Agency's Crisis and Conflict Unit. The annual operational budget of the CDCS is approximately US\$3 million, more than half of which is made available to French embassies and consulates.⁴²

2.5. Intergovernmental Bodies: The European Union's PRISM

Finally, major intergovernmental bodies, such as the United Nations and NATO, have also paid greater attention to stabilisation in recent years. Yet, in most cases, the gradual adoption of stabilisation practices has not been accompanied by institutional innovations, except for the EU's Prevention of Conflicts, Rule of Law/Security Sector Reform, Integrated Approach, Stabilisation and Mediation Unit (PRISM).

Following the introduction of the Instruments for Stability (renamed Instruments Contributing to Stability and Peace in 2014⁴³), this Unit is intended to serve as a catalyst for the EU's Integrated Approach and is meant to better align existing mechanisms for crisis response with that of early detection and prevention.⁴⁴ The Unit reports to the Deputy Secretary General for the Common Security and Defence Policy and Crisis Response, and is meant to operationalise the EU's instrument of crisis management, in particular the so-called stabilisation actions under Article 28(1) of the Lisbon Treaty. These institutional developments come at a time when the organisation is exploring ways to promote stabilisation in non-EU countries, including in North and Sub-Saharan Africa.⁴⁵

⁴¹ "The Crisis and Support Center: Emergency Diplomacy", French Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Development, https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/IMG/pdf/br-cdcs-gb-09-09-2015_cle42b42c.pdf, consulted in May 2018.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ The Instrument for Stability was created in 2006 to "support measures aimed at safeguarding or re-establishing the conditions under which the partner countries of the European Union can pursue their long term development goals". https://ec.europa.eu/europeaid/sectors/human-rights-and-governance/peace-and-security/instrument-contributing-stability-and-peace_en, consulted in June 2018.

⁴⁴ Tobiasz Pietz, "Flexibility and "Stabilization Actions": EU Crisis Management One Year After the Global Strategy". Zif: Center for International Peace Operations, Policy Briefing, September 2017, 2-3.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

3. Defining the Conceptual Boundaries of Stabilisation Activities

Along with these institutional innovations, governments have similarly been busy defining their conceptual approach to stabilisation. Indeed, as mentioned in the introduction of this paper, there remains a considerable lack of clarity about what stabilisation is, what it is intended to achieve, and when it begins or ends.

In fact, there is no clear definition of stabilisation. Indeed, despite minimal agreement about its main parameters, both academics and practitioners have been hard-pressed to forge a singular definition of the concept that is narrow enough to be useful.⁴⁶ Instead, what has emerged in the literature are mostly “bland and generic formulations” that evade rather than elucidate key conceptual debates surrounding stabilisation.⁴⁷

Major doctrinal documents produced on the subject by countries with experience in leading stabilisation efforts are no exceptions in this regard. For the most part, as experts have pointed out, these documents read more as “public relations brochures” than as conceptual documents designed to guide government policies.⁴⁸ In particular, they often remain vague about the scope and objectives of stabilisation activities, causing a considerable amount of confusion about the nature of the task and the goals to be achieved.

At the heart of the problem lies the disagreement about whether stabilisation should be defined more narrowly - as the management of acute crises - or more broadly, portraying state fragility as the main challenge (see Box 2). Indeed, government publications tend to remain particularly evasive on this issue, with both approaches frequently coexisting, to different degrees, in the same documents. As such, in many cases, efforts made by governments and intergovernmental bodies to define their approach to stabilisation have done only little to clarify the situation.

Box 2 The broader and narrower approaches to stabilisation

The broader approach to stabilisation tends to describe the challenge in terms of fragility, which, in line with the OECD consensus, describes the conditions of weak statehood across various dimensions of state capacity, including the lack of service delivery, political instability and unspecified violence. It sees structural stability, good governance, sustainable peace and prosperity as the main goals to which stabilisation contributes.⁴⁹

The narrower approach refers to an urgent effort to move on from situations of acute crises and large-scale violence in conflict-affected countries. In this narrow vision, stabilisation is not a conflict prevention method, nor is it the antidote to long-term state fragility but the exceptional toolkit to build resilience and pave the way for longer-term recovery, while the normal instruments of bilateral and multilateral diplomacy, development, police and military are considered sufficient to reach longer-term state- and peace-building objectives.⁵⁰

⁴⁶ Barakat, July 2016, op. cit., 1.

⁴⁷ Zyck and Muggah, “Preparing Stabilisation for 21st Century Security Challenges”. *Stability: International Journal of Security and Development*, 4(1): 54, 2015, 3. For instance, Barakat, Deely and Zyck defined stabilisation as “a process involving coercive force in concert with reconstruction and development assistance during or in the immediate aftermath of a violent conflict in order to prevent the continuation or recurrence of conflict and destabilizing levels of non-conflict violence.” While useful in setting the core tenets of stabilisation, this definition fails to present what makes stabilisation distinctive from competing concepts or mechanisms of interventions in fragile settings. Zyck, Barakat, and Deely, “The Evolution of Stabilisation Concepts and Praxis”, op. cit., 19.

⁴⁸ Rotmann, op. cit., 2.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

3.1. The United Kingdom

The UK's Stabilisation Unit (SU) has issued a variety of documents to inform strategic and operational choices made by the British government and its international partners with regard to activities in fragile and conflict-affected states, in general, and stabilisation activities, in particular.

In line with US thinking on post-war reconstruction, stabilisation was first approached by the SU as a broadly defined task aimed to "address instability and conflict overseas because it is both morally right and in Britain's national interest".⁵¹ In recent years, however, a more restricted agenda of stabilisation as a transitional phase has been set out. For instance, in a 2014 document entitled "the UK government's Approach to Stabilisation" the SU defines stabilisation as "one of the approaches used in situations of violent conflict which is designed to protect and promote legitimate political authority, using a combination of integrated civilian and military actions to reduce violence, re-establish security and prepare for longer-term recovery [...]".⁵² In this context, stabilisation is seen as a process, not an end in itself, aiming to bring about "some form of political settlement in a pressured and violent context".⁵³ It is applied in "politically messy, violent, challenging and often non-permissive environments in which the legitimacy of the state and political settlement is likely to be contested".⁵⁴

Importantly, the success of stabilisation efforts is not determined by what quantifiable outcomes are achieved, but rather by "how far any intervention helps increase the prospects for longer-term stability".⁵⁵ In fact, the UK government's approach also includes an ambitious objective of "structural stability" to which stabilisation activities contribute by establishing "political systems which are representative and legitimate, capable of managing conflict and change peacefully, and societies in which human rights and rule of law are respected, basic needs are met, security established and opportunities for social and economic development are open to all".⁵⁶ Stabilisation is therefore being seen as a "first step towards progress on statebuilding and peacebuilding in very insecure environments".⁵⁷ However, while conceptually sound, the link between the short-term – and inherently political – stabilisation activities and the more ambitious objective of structural stability remains poorly defined and articulated, adding as such to the current confusion about where do stabilisation activities fit in this continuum of engagement in fragile settings.⁵⁸

Recent SU publications have also highlighted the risk of hasty attempts to engage in externally driven transformative peace processes and institution-building processes in conflict-affected countries, noting that the requirements for immediate stabilisation proved sometimes to be at odds with longer-term goals. In particular, recent SU publications on the vital role play by elite bargains in reducing violence and successful transitions out of conflict seems to suggest a re-focus of the UK conception of stabilisation towards a narrower approach, increasingly focused on the need to engage pragmatically with the configurations of power and take an iterative, political, deal-making approach that helps deliver stability and reductions in violence.⁵⁹

⁵¹ "Building Stability Overseas", FCO, MOD, DFID, 2011, 5.

⁵² "The UK Government's Approach to Stabilisation", FCO, MOD, DFID, 2014, 1.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ "UK Principles for Stabilisation Organisations and Programmes". Stabilisation Issues Note, Stabilisation Unit, 2014, 3.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ FCO, MOD, DFID, 2014, op. cit., 1.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Rotman and Steinacker, op.cit., 15.

⁵⁹ "Supporting Elite Bargains to Reduce Violent Conflict", Stabilisation Unit, April 2018.

⁶⁰ As noted by Rotmann "a resilient country may still be deeply fragile, with unrepresentative, broadly illegitimate and sometimes violent politics, lack of respect for human rights and the rule of law, minimal levels of basic security and livelihood, and for most, few if any opportunities for advancement". Rotmann, 2016, op. cit., 6.

⁶¹ Rotmann and Steinacker, op.cit., 17.

⁶² Peace and Stabilization Operations Program. "Canada's Approach to Stabilization", 1. http://international.gc.ca/world-monde/issues_development-enjeux_developpement/response_conflict-reponse_conflicts/psop.aspx?lang=eng, consulted in June 2018. Similarly, in the Canadian Forces Joint Publication 01 (2009), the Canadian military defines stability activities as

3.2. Canada

Framed, at least initially, as a “3D” approach, the Canadian understanding of stabilisation is based on the idea of short-term, quick impact actions to prevent and overcome emergency situations of acute crises and large-scale violence. However, contrary to the British version, stability is not conceived as a longer-term objective (e.g. structural stability), but more modestly as a synonym for resilience⁶⁰, described as “one goal among others to pave the way for long-term peace and prosperity”.⁶¹

In line with this approach, START/PSOP defines stabilisation as the “efforts to help a country or community manage, recover or emerge from an upheaval such as a violent conflict, political strife or natural disasters leading to large-scale social unrest”.⁶² It includes different combinations of processes and activities in support of the host country, and, depending on each specific context, involves some or all of the following tasks: managing or reducing violence; protecting civilians and key institutions; providing essential government services; promoting political processes; and preparing for longer-term reconstruction, peacebuilding and development.⁶³

Yet, in practice, Canada’s PSOP has also funded a number of stabilisation initiatives that primarily seek to address broader conditions of fragility. In recent years, these have included: “reinforcing police reform efforts in Ukraine; reducing tensions among communities in Lebanon hosting Syrian refugees; supporting the implementation of the Colombian peace plan; and strengthening accountability for war crimes, crimes against humanity and genocide”.⁶⁴

3.3. The United States

In the US, the term “stabilisation” is yet to be uniformly, precisely defined across relevant stakeholders.⁶⁵ In a context of weak interagency coordination, both the DoD and State Department have sought to provide guidance for policy-makers and their staff regarding stabilisation, outlining distinct, sometimes conflicting, visions of stabilisation (or stability operations).⁶⁶

Since 2005, the DoD recognizes stability operations as “an essential military mission of equal importance to major combat operations”.⁶⁷ This first appeared with the issuance of DoD Directive 3000.05 “Military Support for Stability, Security, Transition, and Reconstruction Operations”, which was superseded in 2009 by DOD Instruction “Stability Operations”.⁶⁸ Along those lines, the US Army’s Stability Operations Field Manual (FM) 3-07, conceptually replaced full-spectrum operations with stability operations, and defined stabilisation as “the process by which underlying tensions that might lead to a resurgence in violence and a breakdown in law and order are managed and reduced, while efforts are made to support preconditions for successful long-term development”.⁶⁹

By way of contrast, the joint military doctrine issued by the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JP 3-07) in August 2016 defined stabilisation as “the process by which military and non-military actors collectively apply various instruments of

⁶⁰ “specific missions and tasks carried out by armed forces to maintain, restore, or establish a climate of order”. “Canadian Military Doctrine”, Department of Defence, 2009, Canadian Forces Joint Publication.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ See, “Stabilization: Lessons from the U.S. Experience in Afghanistan”, op. cit., 4.

⁶⁶ Interestingly, the “Guiding Principles for Stabilization and Reconstruction”, published in 2009 by the United States Institute of Peace, and which has become one of the key reference on the subject, articulate a definition of stabilisation that draws primarily from the UK government’s Stabilisation Unit. “Guiding Principles for Stabilization and Reconstruction”, USIP, 2009, 232.

⁶⁷ Caroline R. Earle, “Taking Stock. Interagency Integration in Stability Operations”, PRISM, 3, no. 2, 1.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ US Army. 2008. “Field Manual 3-07: Stability Operations”. Department of the Army. Although the US Army’s definition shares many aspects of the UK approach, it also features a number of key differences. In particular, the primary focus is on the external, international “stabilizers” rather than on the local populations and the national institutions. Indeed, as pointed out by Zyck, Sultan and Deely, in the US definition “stabilisation is something that is done to an unstable location” rather than, as in the UK definition, a “process aimed to facilitate or promote”. Ibid, 19.

national power to address drivers of conflict, foster host-nations resiliencies, and create conditions that enable sustainable peace and security". It identified five US government stability sectors: 1) security; 2) justice and reconciliation; 3) humanitarian assistance and social being; 4) governance and participation; and 5) economic stabilization and infrastructure.⁷⁰ As such, whereas the US army definition presumes that violence has already been stopped, JP 3-07 describes a broader range of stabilisation (or stability) actions that can be conducted across the conflict continuum, in various dimensions of state fragility.

Similarly, the first State Department's Quadrennial Diplomacy and Development Review (QDDR, 2011), initiated by then Secretary of State Hilary Clinton, defined the US' stabilisation approach as the task to "build sustainable peace by resolving underlying grievances fairly and helping to build government institutions that can provide basic but effective security and justice systems". It went on to say that: "Over the longer term, our mission is to build a government's ability to address challenges, promote development, protect human rights, and provide for its people on its own".⁷¹ Within this broad framework, as experts have rightly observed, stabilisation becomes "an umbrella term for conflict prevention, peacebuilding, development, human rights promotion and capacity building of state institutions".⁷²

In recent years, however, the State Department's definition has shifted from a focus on desired end-states to a narrower vision of stabilisation. Indeed, in sharp contrast with its predecessor, the second QDDR, issued in 2015 under then Secretary of State John Kerry, deliberately avoided grand statements about broad, long-term objectives of stabilisation activities, framing the US approach exclusively in terms of "threats to be prevented, mitigated, or responded to".⁷³

This trend in the US towards a narrower concept of stabilisation seems confirmed by the recent publication, in 2018, of the "US Stabilization Assistance Review" in which the State Department, USAID and DoD set forth a common definition of stabilisation as a "political endeavour involving an integrated civilian-military (civ-mil) process to create conditions where locally legitimate authorities and systems can peaceably manage conflicts and prevent a resurgence of violence. Transitional in nature, stabilisation may include efforts to establish civil security, provide access to dispute resolution, deliver targeted basic services, and establish a foundation for the return of displaced people and longer-term development".⁷⁴

3.4. France

The conceptual heterogeneity noted above is also found in France, whose approach remains disputed among the various institutional stakeholders of stabilisation. On the one hand, the Ministry of Defence has clearly subscribed to the narrower conception of stabilisation as the exceptional toolkit to defuse crises in conflict-affected countries. In a 2010 document, entitled "Contribution des forces armées à la stabilisation" (armed forces' contribution to stabilisation), stabilisation is defined as "one of the processes of crisis management which aims at restoring the minimal conditions of viability of a state (or a region), while putting an end to violence as a

⁷⁰ "Stability", Joint Chiefs of Staff, JP 3-07, August 2016, IX.

⁷¹ "Quadrennial Diplomacy and Development Review", US Department of State, 2011, 13.

⁷² Rotmann and Steinacker, *op.cit.*, 23.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 5. Yet, in spite of this recent shift, the US continues to actively support dozens of what it refers to as "stability operations" across Africa, the Middle East, central Asia and South and Southeast Asia, expanding the concept's boundaries to include a wide-ranging agenda aimed to bring stability to countries beset by "fragility". Robert Muggah, "Conclusion", in Muggah, Robert, (ed.), *op. cit.*, 244.

⁷⁴ "SAR. Stabilization Assistance Review: A Framework for Maximizing the Effectiveness of U.S. Government Efforts to Stabilize Conflict-Affected Areas", State Department, DOD, USAID, 2018, 4.

mean of contestation [...] and lays the foundation for a return to normal life by launching a civilian reconstruction process. The stabilisation phase is the period of crisis management in which this process is dominant”.⁷⁵

On the other hand, the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs’ Stabilisation Unit identifies as key priorities for its activities “countries where crises affect the functioning of government, democratic values and respects for human rights”.⁷⁶ In these countries, the unit “provides support right through to the holding of free and transparent elections that produce a legitimate government, supported by a redeployment of services important to the rule of law across the national territory”.⁷⁷

In particular, the unit identifies two main areas of stabilisation, both framed as long-term, end-states paths out of state fragility. The first area is governance support, which encompasses the following tasks: “helping restore public finances and ensure payment of salaries; restoring impartial, independent justice; recreating the conditions to restore the rule of law and redeploy public services; contributing to the restoration of security by reinforcing internal security forces and support the DDR process; and supporting electoral processes and local government bodies”.⁷⁸ The second area of stabilisation activity identified is civil society support, which includes a range of activities aimed to “support national reconciliation and restore social cohesion; support human rights and combat impunity, and; promote the role of the media through capacity-building”.⁷⁹

In recent years, predictably, this expanded understanding of the concept has contributed to generating further confusion in French diplomatic, military and development circles about whether stabilisation should be considered as a specific set of activities or as a strategic objective. In this regard, the recent focus on the 3D approach, formulated by President Macron during the annual gathering of French ambassadors at the Elysée Palace in August 2017 and currently at the centre of efforts to increase stability in the Sahel region, might be a first step in helping clarify France’s approach to stabilisation.

3.5. Intergovernmental Bodies

The stabilisation agenda has also been catching on in major international organisations. In the UN context, the emergence of stabilisation in the peacekeeping lexicon has been associated with the wider review of the UN’s system-wide approach to fragility. Yet, stabilisation – both as a concept and a set of practices – has remained undefined.⁸⁰ As such, while the UN Security Council has, thus far, authorised four UN peacekeeping missions – MINUSTAH, MONUSCO, MINUSMA, MINUSCA – that it has chosen to call stabilisation missions, there is no clarity as to what stabilisation stands for in the context of such missions.

Instead, the assumptions and expectations associated with stabilisation remain largely implicit. Indeed, in practice, it appears to signal a departure from complex, multi-dimensional peace-keeping operations of the past decade to more modest security and development packages, conceived as part of a wider “exit” or “consolidation” strategy that might facilitate a way out of prolonged peace support operations.⁸¹ As one observer has suggested, stabilisation in the UN context thus seems to imply a more “instrumental and low-key

⁷⁵ “Contribution des Forces Armées à la Stabilisation”, Ministère de la Défense, 2010.

⁷⁶ “The Crisis and Support Center: Emergency Diplomacy”, French Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Development, https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/IMG/pdf/br-cdcs-gb-09-09-2015_cle42b42c.pdf, consulted in May 2018.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ Robert Muggah, “The UN turns to stabilization”, op. cit. For instance, the 2008 capstone doctrine treats “stability” and “security” as goals but does not refer to stabilisation. Likewise, the 2009 report, “New partnership Agenda: Charting a New Horizon for UN Peace keeping”, avoids directly mentioning stabilisation

⁸¹ Ibid.

intermediary form of intervention or subsidiary function in concert with an overall peace support operation”; a kind of “short-term bridge linking peace-keeping to peace-building” by promoting “limited institutional capacity and visible dividends instead of achieving more far-reaching developmental goals”.⁸²

Arguably, the UN’s hesitation to provide greater definitional clarity also comes from an early recognition among UN practitioners that stabilisation is not a technical but rather a very political form of intervention. As pointed out by Robert Muggah, “questions about where, when, how and what to do are ultimately the discretion of governments of countries that undertake such activities”,⁸³ which explains the UN’s careful and measured approach with the issue, and the current uncertainties about both the goals and the practices of stabilisation in the UN peacekeeping context.⁸⁴

NATO has, similarly, paid greater attention to stabilisation activities in recent years. Its approach was defined in a September 2011 document entitled “Political Guidance on Ways to Improve NATO’s Involvement in Stabilisation and Reconstruction”, in which stabilisation and reconstruction activities are described as efforts to “address complex problems in fragile, conflict, and post-conflict states” which contribute to a “comprehensive approach to crisis management and to complementarity, coherence and coordination of the international community’s efforts towards security, development and governance”.⁸⁵

As such, the organisation does not refer to stabilisation as an independent campaign type but as part of broader crisis management and crises response operations. Interventions remain nonetheless rooted in the belief that stabilisation activities can contribute towards establishing “long-term stability and strengthened governance, local capacity building and the promotion of ownership by the relevant national authorities, encouragement of the rule of law and establishing the basis for economic, human and social development”.⁸⁶ In particular, NATO identifies four types of stabilisation activities: i) Security and Control; ii) Support to Security Sector Reform; iii) Support to Initial Restoration of Services; and iv) Support to Initial Governance Tasks.

With regards to the duration of efforts, NATO does not establish a clear distinction between stabilisation and reconstruction activities, which, as in the US context, seems to imply a paired but linear sequence of activities. However, it is stressed that the organisation should handover its activities to the national authorities or international actors as soon as conditions allow.⁸⁷

By comparison, EU stabilisation missions have been essentially deployed in low-violence situations, either before violent conflicts have emerged or after ceasefire agreements are in place. Unlike the UN and NATO, the EU does not usually deploy immediately after a conflict has ended, and rarely engages in enforcement activities.⁸⁸ Within this framework, the EU’s approach to stabilisation has drawn on a wide-range of policy tools that combine both short-term objectives aimed at strengthening the host state’s autonomous capabilities to respond to low-intensity security threats and longer-term institution-building and socio-economic development goals.⁸⁹ Transition from fragility to stability is thus achieved by creating “grass-root conditions for economic opportunity and human development [as well as] robust public institutions and a more accountable government, capable of

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ While the ambiguity surrounding the concept and practice of stabilisation may well be intentional, it has nonetheless created a host of challenges for the UN. This has been highlighted by the 2015 “HIPPO” report on the reform of UN peace operations, which urged for clarification of the term stabilisation. “Report of the High-Level Independent Panel on Peace Operations on Uniting Our Strengths for Peace – Politics, Partnership and people”, United Nations, Document A/70/95-S, para 114, June 2015, 446.

⁸⁵ “Political Guidance on Ways to Improve NATO’s Involvement in Stabilisation and Reconstruction”. NATO Public Diplomacy Division, NATO, September 2011, https://www.nato.int/nato_static/assets/pdf/pdf_2011_09/20111004_110922-political-guidance.pdf, consulted in June 2018.

⁸⁶ Ibid. “Designing Future Stabilization Efforts”, The Hague centre for Strategic Studies, 2014, 59.

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ Ibid.

providing basic development services”.⁹⁰ In the wake of the EU Global Strategy adopted in 2016, it remains to be seen whether this broad approach will be refocused on more crisis management dimensions of stabilisation efforts.

4. Conclusions and Recommendations: How can Arab Gulf States Support Stabilisation Efforts

In recent years, stabilisation activities have tended to amalgamate all these above-mentioned approaches to stabilisation. Rather than becoming increasingly coherent, the conceptual and programmatic boundaries of stabilisation continue to be surprisingly elastic both in form and content, despite the rapid growth of norms, guidelines and manuals concerned with defining its broad contours. In fact, the relative lack of clarity on the nature of the task and the goals to be achieved mean that, in practice, stabilisation continues to imply different things in different contexts.

Yet, following the Iraq and Afghanistan experience, there has been a distinct trend towards more realistic, less ambitious goals for stabilisation activities. Indeed, after years of limited success, experts and practitioners alike agree that, even under the best circumstances, the objectives set out by the broad approach to stabilisation appears hardly feasible. Nor does it seem necessary: in most cases the traditional tools and activities of bilateral and multilateral diplomacy, development and defence cooperation have proved more successful in dealing with the multidimensional challenges of state fragility.⁹¹

Even a narrow approach, however, cannot afford to be based on short-term perspectives or rigid timelines. In fact, there is no “predetermined period for stabilisation – it can range from months to years”.⁹² Success in stabilisation missions thus largely depends on the level of political will and investment necessary for a planned and (sometimes) prolonged effort. This means that realistic assessments that align ends, ways, and means of stabilisation efforts are critical.⁹³ It also implies that the timing and patterns of transition to parallel or longer-term engagement need to be carefully planned and implemented and cannot merely be seen as a “process” – as in the UK approach.⁹⁴

In this regard, Arab Gulf States with experience contributing to regional stabilisation efforts could consider exploring ways to develop the institutional designs required to prepare for, design, execute, monitor and evaluate these activities. While in principle there is no single “best” solution – each whole-of-government approach being shaped by a government’s particular political culture, legal framework and financial resources⁹⁵ – the focus should be on establishing policies and processes that would help achieve better coordination between defence, security, diplomacy and development.

This process can be incremental, starting at an agency or ministerial level, with a dedicated team working on stabilisation to share lessons, coordinate approaches, and leverage engagement with other government entities, and then evolving into a more comprehensive, integrated approach, in which the Ministry of Foreign Affairs

⁹¹ Rotmann, *op. cit.*, p.6.

⁹² “Security Sector Stabilisation”, Issues Note, Stabilisation Unit, March 2014, 18.

⁹³ “Stabilization: Lessons from the U.S. Experience in Afghanistan”, *op. cit.*

⁹⁴ While the modalities for overcoming the main challenges at each stage of the process are not in dispute, there is still a great deal of uncertainty about how stabilisation projects can be effectively linked with the broader tools of development cooperation. Indeed, past stabilisation operations in countries such as Bosnia-Herzegovina, Haiti and Liberia have highlighted the tensions between short-term stabilisation imperatives and longer-term state-building goals: in these cases, not only were the two objectives not always aligned, they also sometimes appeared to be contradictory, with the priority of ensuring immediate stability often undermining prospects for securing a sustainable, long-term peace.

⁹⁵ Becky Carter, “Multi-Agency Stabilisation Operations”, GSDRC, February 2015, 3.

work with the military, the aid donors, law-enforcement agencies, and economic actors, to ensure a coordinated approach to stabilisation. This more ambitious option would require laying out a robust whole-of-government strategy, defining cross-sector priorities and attributing roles and responsibilities.

Looking across governmental experience reviewed in this paper, this process is likely to face three primary barriers: 1) a strategic gap affecting the integration of political, security and development strategies at the planning and prioritisation stage; 2) a civilian gap of inadequate capabilities and resources at the implementation stage; and 3) a cultural gap impeding integration across government, with disagreement on principles, policies and practice.⁹⁶

While effective leadership seems key to address possible gaps in strategic oversight, the civilian and cultural gaps are likely to require a more sustained engagement across government to identify common interests and manage different, sometimes contradictory, rationales for engaging in fragile settings across sectors and activities. In the MENA region or elsewhere, humanitarian aid workers and conflict mediation experts, in particular, have been traditionally reluctant to operate within a whole-of-government approach by fear that their integration could amount to loss of impartiality.⁹⁷ As such, the OECD, for example, recommends establishing clear and transparent processes to identify and manage such tensions, and possible trade-offs, between neutral, impartial provision of humanitarian response and political, strategic objectives.⁹⁸

Similarly, Arab Gulf States could also consider training a cadre of government employees working on stabilisation issues or in conflict-affected countries. This could be complemented by the establishment of a staff roster to ensure that stabilisation operations are timely as well as staffed by personnel with relevant skills, training and experience. Importantly, training content will need to address planning and operational requirements in a range of different instability contexts.

In addition, stabilisation efforts must be rigorously evaluated. Lessons from previous operations need to be learned and applied in future endeavours. As such, it is worth highlighting the importance of developing robust measures of effectiveness for stabilisation programmes. Too often, attempts at evaluating the impact of stabilisation efforts rely on “broad indicators that do not necessarily draw a direct link between an intervention and an outcome”, making it difficult to draw conclusion and learn from these experiences.⁹⁹

Finally, it is crucial that Arab Gulf States rigorously define their conception of stabilisation, including the scope and objectives of these activities. In particular, this should help clarify what stabilisation efforts will aim to achieve and where these efforts are geographically focused. Considering lessons learned from past stabilisation missions, Arab Gulf Countries could consider adopting a narrower approach focused on efforts to move on from situations of acute crises and large-scale violence in conflict-affected countries. In the MENA region, this would currently include countries such as Yemen, Libya, Syria, Somalia, Iraq.

⁹⁶ Serefino et al., 2012, cited by Carter, op. cit., 3.

⁹⁷ Gilles Carbonnier, “Humanitarian and Development Aid in the Context of Stabilization: Blurring the Lines and Broadening the Gap”, in Muggah, op.cit., 19.

⁹⁸ Carter, op. cit., 2.

⁹⁹ Sultan, 2016, op. cit., 2.

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