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Executive Summary

Stabilisation in the Contemporary Middle East and North Africa:
Different Dimensions of an Elusive Concept

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- The past two decades have brought an increased overlap of security complexes between the Levant, North Africa, the Gulf, Europe and the Sahel. As a result, developments in this wider MENA region have a greater impact on Western security, while Gulf States increasingly have a stake in stability in the Sahel and North Africa.

- Across the globe, policy-makers and pundits agree that several countries in the wider MENA region are in desperate need of 'stabilisation'. But the internal and external actors involved have different ideas about what stability means and how to get there. With Western voices less dominant than they once were, a differentiation in stated objectives and ambitions is causing deadlock at the highest levels of international diplomacy, fueling further regional instability instead.

- Stabilisation operations tend to combine military with non-military tools and became the norm of international interventions after the end of the Cold War, arguably starting with the response to the Balkan Wars. Unfortunately, for all the ambitions of international efforts in Kosovo, Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya and elsewhere, the stated objectives of stabilisation operations have oftentimes remained far removed from the realities on the ground.

- To better comprehend and learn from recent stabilisation efforts, it seems useful to dissect these 'comprehensive' or 'integrated' approaches and look at the different dimensions of stabilisation, as well as the interaction between them. These dimensions include, among others: political and diplomatic efforts; military and security engagement; economic aid and technical assistance; humanitarian and development assistance; as well as transitional justice and reconciliation.

- Given the involvement of different policy communities and organisations in stabilisation operations, cooperation and coordination between these communities is crucial. However, as these groups tend to be endowed with distinct professional cultures, world views, funding mechanisms and overall objectives, this remains a key challenge in practice.

- Within the political dimension, the current changes in the global and regional balance of power are proving an obstacle to finding solutions, as those involved pursue a zero-sum strategy. At the same time, the dominance of Western approaches in recent years, has arguably fed into the limited success rate of mediation and peace negotiations, due to too strong an emphasis on democratisation as a prerequisite for stability.

- Tackling domestic and international spoilers, incorporating demands for decentralisation and regional autonomy, as well as dealing with media and information warfare are other challenges that are commonly witnessed in the political dimension of stabilisation. Weak or weakened national identities leave substantial room to be exploited by manipulative messages and subversive causes.

- Within the military and security dimension of stabilisation efforts, depoliticisation of the security forces is an important element, in particular for the success of security sector reform (SSR) and for

the ability to disarm, demobilise and reintegrate armed actors that were part of the conflict. A lack of trust, corruption, limited state capacity and the ability of militias to attract funding from external actors or diaspora communities, compound the efforts.

- Common challenges and current issues that are of vital importance with regard to security include the stabilisation of areas recaptured from Daesh and the ability to coordinate and cooperate internationally in spite of the differences in world views. In addition, external actors need to take into account the importance of local ownership to legitimise campaigns (even though skills, interests and future ambitions may not fully align with those of their international sponsors).

- Economic inequality and material deprivation constitute great challenges to and for MENA governments. As such, calls for economic stabilisation and economic reform are often at the center of current policy debates. War and conflict exacerbate the situation, as the economy is often one of the first areas to exhibit stress, as vital economic infrastructure gets damaged and the risks increase for heightened inflation and liquidity crises.

- Within the economic dimension of stabilisation, common issues within the MENA region that need attention include tackling long-term (youth) unemployment, the transformation of war and illicit economies towards peaceful and licit objectives, as well as the settlement of contested land and property rights.

- The linking of security and development has sparked debates within the development community about what the actual objectives are of aid and development. Do we provide aid primarily to increase political influence, or a tool to reduce poverty and economic development or one complementary with the use of force, working towards shared political goals?

- Development and humanitarian assistance, if poorly designed, can become a cause of rent-seeking behaviour and, in turn, instability. Smaller, narrowly targeted projects made conditional on information-sharing seem least likely to fuel instability, as they tend to rely more on in-depth knowledge of local settings and dynamics.

- Within the dimension of development and humanitarian assistance, the issues that deserve additional attention include a better understanding of the value of 'quick wins', the impact of rotation on maintaining trust relationships with the local population and ways to increase the effectiveness of larger scale initiatives.

- Transitional justice and reconciliation is of great importance to make stability sustainable. Transitional justice combines (quasi)-judicial tools with non-judicial measures considered necessary to deal with the negative legacy of a former political regime. This can include for example prosecution and trials, reparations, fact-finding and truth commissions, as well as the rewriting of national histories and collective memories.

- Transitional justice and reconciliation is a delicate matter and can be a double-edged sword, as only a fine line separates transitional justice from revenge. This holds in particular true in the current MENA region, where a competition of ideas is taking place regarding governance and (state) identities, thereby pitching against each other different elites, factions and world views. Politicisation of transitional justice is indeed one of the key risks.

- The past decade of turmoil has generated a large number of case studies, insights and lessons learned to draw from with regard to stabilisation. Only by critically scrutinizing what has been done and to what effect, a common understanding can be crafted of how the wider MENA region could move towards a form of 'stability' that is sustainable.