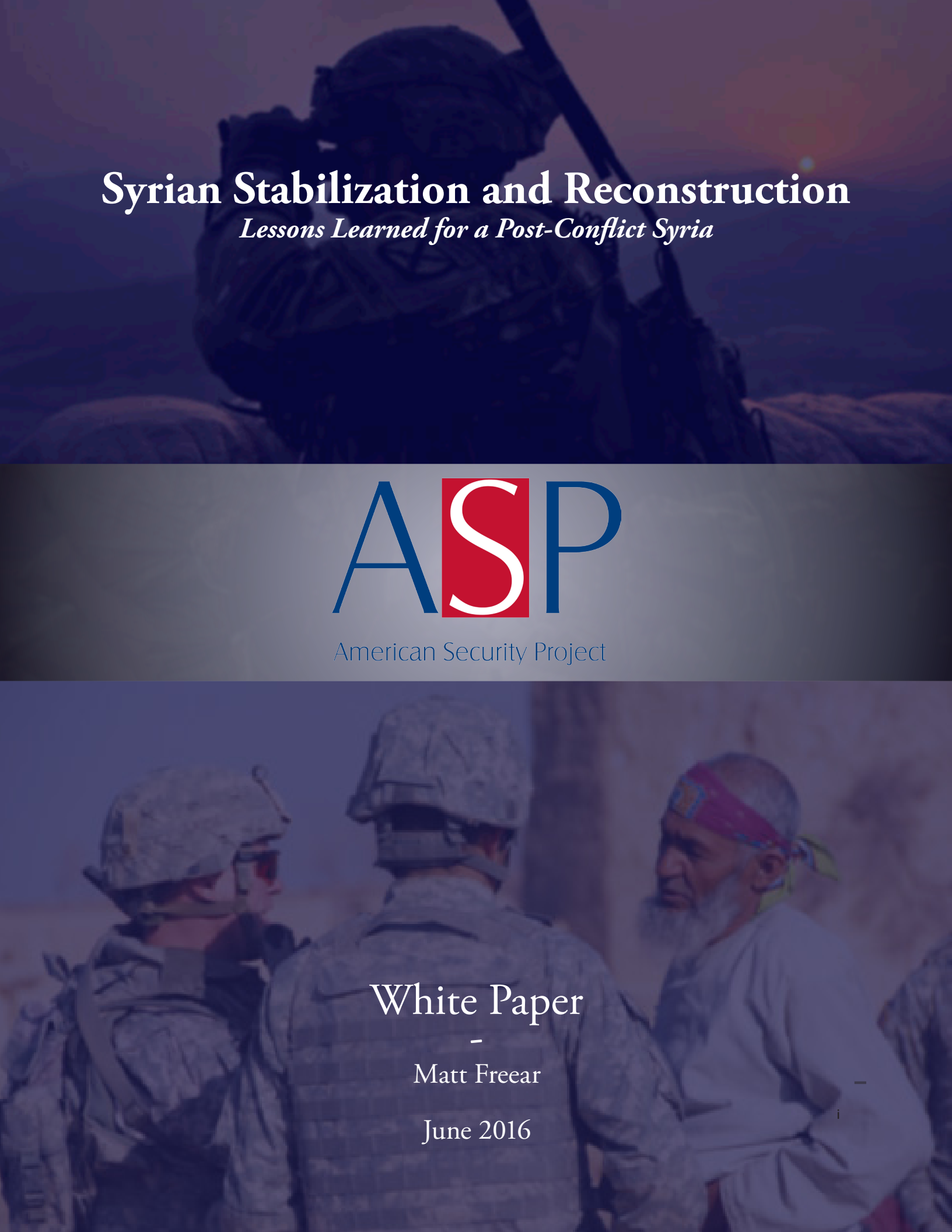

Syrian Stabilization and Reconstruction

Lessons Learned for a Post-Conflict Syria

ASP

American Security Project

White Paper

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Matt Freear

June 2016

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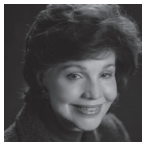

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In this Report:

Amidst the long-running war in Syria, peace negotiations, counterterrorism and geopolitics continue to resolve in favor of peace and stability. Learning relevant lessons from past conflicts requires a stronger and more realistic integration of a wide range of "stabilization" capacities of the US Government and needs to include a wider field of actors. Stabilization as a high-level political strategy provides a stronger way of looking at generating peace and incorporating lessons from recent conflicts to assist efforts towards peace in Syria.

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IN BRIEF

- Recent conflicts have provided opportunities for learning from limitations and shortcomings on strategy-making and stabilization. The Syrian context demands a renewed approach to building stability. This is a process which can start now and is not contradictory to negotiating peace between warring parties.
- Critical lessons have been identified: focusing on "localism", and enabling bottom-up discussions around a positive political vision for the future society, economy and politics of Syria should start now.
- Additional major lessons from recent conflicts include unifying analysis, efforts and objectives across actors; being realistic about capacities available; maintaining strategic patience and managing expectations; and identifying actors with the necessary capacities, political resolve and influence.
- In recent and ongoing conflicts, counter-terrorism policies and strategies to stabilize countries emerging from conflict have made uneasy bedfellows. Resolving increasingly disparate and conflicting objectives requires responding to lessons from recent conflicts and a renewed prioritization of stability.
- Stabilization is a political task and requires integrated civilian leadership across developmental, security and diplomatic functions. The search for peace and stability needs a broader approach to engaging a range of actors and capacities, including the regional and private sector.

About the Author

Matt Freear is a strategic communications expert, specializing in security and stabilization in post-conflict environments. He has worked in campaigning, advisory and official roles for variously the UK and US governments, the United Nations, European and African Unions in Kenya, Libya, Somalia, Afghanistan and Iraq.

Summary

The Syrian conflict is entering its 5th year. It has spread to become an entrenched regional proxy war. The total collapse of state control in large swathes of territory has allowed the creation of an international terrorist grouping that presents an "unprecedented threat to international peace and security"[1] while the rump of the central government, supported by Russia, struggles to re-assert control against an array of opposition forces. Syria of 2016, therefore, features a rivalry between the West and Russia, a transnational terrorist threat, sectarian divides, ethnic factionalization, and proxy conflicts between Iran and Saudi Arabia. Syria even features elements of climate-conflict and resource wars over water and food. This is 21st Century war at its most elemental and devastating.

Current US Government policy, and that of its partners, espouses two preeminent foreign policy objectives in Syria: the defeat of the terrorist group ISIL, and a negotiated peace through a transition from President Assad's regime. There are many lessons to be learned from recent conflicts about how to seek peace while fighting terrorism. Stabilization strategies and counter-terrorism operations have been, and continue to be prosecuted in Africa, Asia and the Middle East in parallel with unclear results.[2] Undoubtedly, Syria requires an approach unique to its circumstances. Nevertheless, current policy decisions can benefit from previous attempts to transform from conflict, through stability, to reconstruction and rebuilding in Syria.

In today's Syria, a forward-thinking agenda needs to be found. One that is cognizant of the deep divisions, the enormity of human devastation and ongoing conflict, without being bowed by the challenge. A reimagined and broader approach to "stabilization" creates new avenues for building peace, unlocks new resources and utilizes better unity of effort.

The concept of stabilization seems to have narrowed in recent years. Among international partners there are a number of different interpretations.[3] It is an approach that is applied differently within the US Government.[4] The most comprehensive description of stabilization, incorporated at the time by the State Department's Bureau of Conflict and Stabilization Operations, was made by the US Institute for Peace. It defines "stabilization" as, *"ending or preventing the recurrence of violent conflict and creating the conditions for normal economic activity and nonviolent politics."*[5] Critically, it lists 5 "End States" towards which all stabilization activities should be directed:

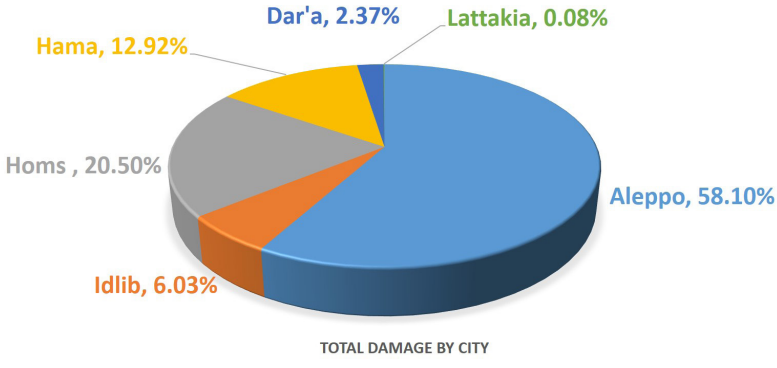
- Safe and Secure Environment
- Rule of Law
- Stable Governance
- Sustainable Economy
- Social Well-Being

The Za'atri Syrian Refugee Camp in Jordan, 2013. State Dept. Photo

That stabilization is defined in terms of peace – and not on terms imposed by external actors – and as a precursor for rebuilding everyday life makes it a powerful, ideological agenda for mobilizing support and effort in a space where many are seeking direction and leadership, while some are being drawn towards the violent ideology of ISIL.

It is never too early in a conflict, even in Syria today, to focus attention and generate debate about what peace and stability should look like. A refreshed approach to "stabilization" provides an alternative to the stalemate brought on by the interplay of international interests – particularly the Russia-US rivalry – and can overlay and direct a counter-terrorism strategy. At its core, a broad-based stabilization strategy is neither dependent on nor does it exclude high-level peace diplomatic negotiations. By integrating development resources, armed force and political influence, it provides a real answer to President Obama's question about "what next?" when the fighting stops in areas of Syria.

Estimated Damage to the Sectors of 6 Syrian cities		
Sector	**Low Damages (US$M)**	**High Damages (US$M)**
Education	$176	$215
Energy	$1,182	$1,445
Health	$383	$469
Housing	$4,056	$4,958
Roads	$128	$156
Water and Sanitation	$99	$121
Total	**$6,025**	**$7,364**



Source: Syria Information Research Initiative, World Bank, May 2016

For those closest to the conflict, stability is neither a common objective nor is it conceived of in the same way.[6] It is clear from previous conflicts that too much detail about what peace looks like has been designed outside the host country. Without a radical rethink about how we approach these sorts of conflicts, we cannot expect a very different outcome.

The idea of peace in Afghanistan first concocted by international partners in Bonn in 2001, and then prosecuted under a UN mandate, was based on a constantly shifting idea of *why* the US-led, NATO alliance intervened; but to this day it continues to fail to address *what* peace and stability really needs to look like locally to be sustainable. In recent years, the idea of "stabilization" has rightly become seen as less technical and more about political understanding and engagement. However, it remains divorced from rebuilding and reconstruction. The relationship between stabilization and reconstruction is neither sequential, nor is it cause and effect. They can be mutually reinforcing, and there are important lessons from Mogadishu in the wake of the withdrawal of al Shabaab in 2011, for example, about how reconstruction helped to stabilize the capital and who led the process of reconstruction.

The research for this paper included personal or telephone interviews conducted with a variety of officials from the US and UK governments, including civilians and military officers.

The Main Lessons

Deploying Quality Stabilization Capabilities

A lesson common to many previous conflicts concerns setting realistic stabilization targets. This in turn calls for an assessment of who has the most relevant capabilities, in terms of balancing those who have the cash and armed force capabilities, but also involves political resolve and influence. The starting point for deploying capability must be growing a coherent, shared analysis of the roots of instability. Examining who has the greatest stake in peace and how to support stabilization led to the following recommendations:

- Prioritizing and working locally as an approach to stabilization must compliment efforts to extend central authority.
- Stabilization and reconstruction may be better led by local organizations, including investors and businesses, rather than solely foreign forces and institutions.
- Less may be more effective. Swamping a country with security forces, contractors and funds is not necessarily a recipe for stability.
- Including as many external and internal actors as needed in creating stabilization even if that feels uncomfortable.

When is "Stable Enough?"

The "shock and awe" of the use of force in recent conflicts has also been reflected in the conduct of stabilization operations with an emphasis on using large amounts of resources early on and the expectation of rapid transformation. Often the promise of change has not been matched by reality, and as a result, international support has waned. Any search for stability in Syria must factor in who has the greatest resolve in supporting stabilization, and encompasses four lessons:

- Preparing a mindset for strategic patience and long-term engagement is preferable to indicating to any group or audience that there can be quick wins.
- Recognizing who has the most stake in peace and stability, at various political levels and in the private sector, can shape stabilization efforts and where they need to be focused.
- There is a need to recognize and adapt to the timelines that different actors have in working out who can commit what capability.
- Even if it is mostly financial and political, the nature of Western intervention needs to be sustainable, and not suffer from the sort of early withdrawal seen in Iraq and Afghanistan.

American troops during departing Iraq during the drawdown. US Army photo

Building a New Vision

Many approaches to stabilization have relied on formal structures and systems of government. Stable governance in fragile states can be hard to identify and needs to be linked to ideas of national identity. Creating debate about a positive, Syrian vision of the future – even in the midst of entrenched conflict – can create alternative avenues to negotiations between armed actors sitting behind closed doors in a negotiating room, and is an important antidote to terrorist groups, such as ISIL, or a continuance of the Assad regime. As an alternative to either the regime of Bashar al Assad or ISIL, the international community needs to:

- Work out ways to put Syrians in the driver's seat. This is deeply challenging but critical to stabilizing and reconstructing a damaged nation.
- Push positive ideas about the creation of a stable Syria to the top of the agenda and overtake objectives that are against ISIL or against the regime.
- Localize political debate, involving many voices, about social, economic and political ideas for the future of Syria in order to help build stability.

Secretary Kerry meeting with members of the Syrian opposition. State Dept. photo

Aligning Implementation and Objectives

Like recent conflicts, US and international policy suffers from overlapping and sometimes contradictory policies. Objective-setting has often preceded a realistic analysis of what is achievable, with the resources available, which can lead to overly-ambitious targets. Therefore, aligning activities and goals needs to focus on a number of different levels:

- Generating common agreement between international actors on the root causes of conflict, and possibly unifying effects.
- Integrating stabilization and reconstruction impact under civilian leadership, at the operational and local level.
- Setting clear and achievable objectives, within the bounds of the resources and capabilities available.

The Vienna talks on Syrian peace, November 2015. State Dept. photo

Deploying High Quality Stabilization Capabilities

In recent armed interventions and in many development contexts, it is the largest donor that often has the most say in strategy-making. Yet, meeting the goals of stabilization, described as the "End States" and listed above, are not about scale of numbers or quantity of resources deployed – even in a country as devastated by war as Syria - but about the quality of the approach.

Interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq have come to be seen as stories of enormous expenditure exacerbating instability, and the subordination of effectiveness to quantity. When it comes to stabilization – which is the journey from violent conflict to uneasy, consensual peace – dramatic force or funds is rarely the game-changing factor. How capabilities are used is more significant. For Syria, the demand for reconstruction resources – calculated at $170 billion over 10 years by the World Bank[7] – looks set to vastly outweigh the funds available from traditional donors. This may prove welcome given the results of massive expenditure on large-scale reconstruction programs by the US and partners in Iraq and Afghanistan. Arguably, a more demand-led approach to stabilization and reconstruction may provide improved results.

When localities emerging from violent conflict stabilize and confidence is raised amongst the local population, the process of reconstruction tends to follow. As people perceive the beginnings of a sustainable peace, communities will naturally come together and invest in rebuilding, however small. Supporting that requires a thorough and impartial understanding of the conflict environment at a local level, and an awareness of "soft" capabilities including local political influence and where resilience and stability lie.

London Conference. Photo courtesy: UK DFID Adam Brown/Crown Copyright.

In the margins of the London Conference on Syria on February 4th, a meeting on stabilization planning concluded with an agreement that the United Nations *"stands ready to coordinate stabilization, post-conflict peace building and recovery efforts and will begin planning work promptly."*[8] Notwithstanding the UN's preparedness to coordinate Syrian stabilization, there is real concern about the absence of leadership and the quantity of resources available for stabilization. This is an area of work that is becoming urgent and will require considerable coordination. Several analyses of lessons learned from stabilization efforts in Afghanistan and Iraq highlight the inadequacy of the civilian component of the mission in terms of organizational capacity and resources.[9]

In interviews, traditional development donors have identified the considerable gap between resources available and the huge demand for Syria's reconstruction; even the innovation of using "soft" development loans is unlikely to be sufficient. This has to be a critical part of the "stabilization" phase in terms of setting up the nature of longer-term investment. The question is whether regional actors and private investors may be able to provide alternative sources of stabilization.

Localism

Reconstruction efforts in previous conflicts have heavily focused on the center; rebuilding central government institutions and national security agencies, and growing the economic center-outwards. Reflecting how thinking has developed since Afghanistan and Iraq, several interviewees emphasized the need to take a localized approach to stabilization, in terms of responding to the immediate political context, rather than depending on building up legitimacy through centralized national institutions. In the Syrian context especially, geographical areas of peace are likely to be patchy, whenever they come. Nevertheless, one interviewee raised concern citing the need for a national context of legitimacy, which local stabilization approaches can be linked to.

In Afghanistan, albeit too late, the effects of stabilization were felt in communities when Provincial Reconstruction Teams were able to deploy their capabilities through advisors and support at the small-scale, district level.[10] In Syria, one interviewee spoken to during the writing of this paper referred to discussions about the "soft partition" of Syria into different zones where local stabilization initiatives could be led by different international actors including the US, Russia, Jordan and Turkey, for instance.[11] Whether that necessarily contradicts the vision of a centralized, unitary state, or prejudges the outcome of national-level peace negotiations, is unclear. Stabilization operations in Somalia and Afghanistan have been conducted under the guise and structures of coalitions in both cases, but nevertheless have had strongly local variations and been subject to the whims of individual members of the international coalition.

Stabilization initiatives have previously been attempted, by Syrians themselves, in the establishment of Local Coordination Committees and other grassroots organizations. If, as seems increasingly likely, future moves towards peace in Syria may be a complex patchwork of settlements and arrangements, then a local approach may require the US and other international partners to enable local needs, actors and ideas rather than intervening directly. Protecting these efforts must be relevant again. Fostering a local perspective, whether it is a neighborhood in a city or a village, is an important alternative to the regime's national manipulation of state institutions that continues to be a feature of the conflict.[12]

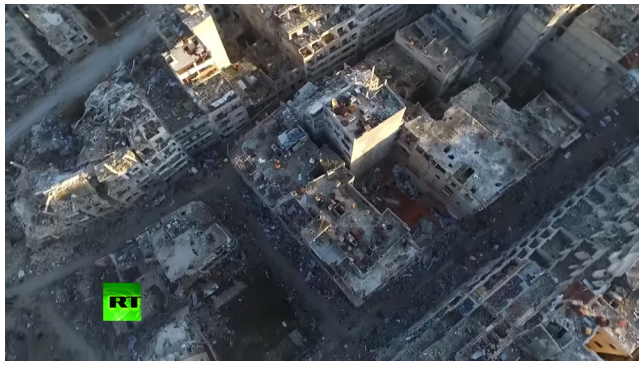
Who has the Most Effective Capability?

It has rarely been obvious which actor or actors, be they external or internal to a country, can best stabilize a given conflict-affected state at a given time. As the insurgency in Afghanistan broadened and deepened in 2006, it increasingly became clear that the political influence and will of Pakistan were a key ingredients to any sort of stability, yet they were not a formally prominent part of the diplomatic or military alliance. The African Union force in Somalia, largely funded by the US and European Union and despite suffering casualties at a rate that Western forces could never sustain, has persisted in operations since they were first deployed in 2007 and most recently turned towards stabilization.[13]

Whose capabilities are deployed and in what way is critical. There is room for taking lessons from conflicts and applying imaginative, adaptive thinking. The UN Development Programme is often expected to be the UN agency responsible for stabilization, or as it defines it: *"bridging the gap between humanitarian, peace-building and longer-term development efforts."*[14] Yet, in previous conflicts the UNDP's limited mandate for supporting security sector reform and political support had to be filled by bilateral support. Responding to the realities of actors' various capabilities, in terms of influence, skill and resources, is critical to implementing an achievable strategy.

Neighboring states can be either critical agents of stability, or instability. The use of and support to proxies in the Syrian war by several regional actors, at this point, seems to indicate limited interest in agreeing on an idea of stability. The wider international community needs to play a primary role in containing and managing the impact of regional powers, particularly Iran, Saudi Arabia and Turkey, on Syria.

Domestic legitimacy, as a foundation of sustainable peace and security, was often subordinated to seeking and building international legitimacy in the armed conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq. Amidst all the talk for outside assistance to resolve the conflict, very little is made of the capacity of Syrians themselves. Their capabilities may look small and precarious, but they are the seeds of stability. In the same vein as the generally applauded National Solidarity Programme in Afghanistan, the Aleppo reconstruction and administration councils, when they were not under direct attack,[15] are just some of the many examples of how bottom-up stabilization initiatives can flourish when given support.



The level of destruction in Syria is immense. RT image

Corruption, mismanaged funds and waste have been prominent hallmarks of the interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq. In recent years, reconstruction, alongside an increased sense of stability in the capital of Somalia, Mogadishu, provides a very different alternative, and one that seems to be driven by non-traditional forms of development. Traditional donors, such as the UN and the European Union, are present but so are some unusual contributors including returning diaspora and support from Turkey. Incorporating trade, development and investment, Turkey has arguably showed an ability to deploy stabilization capability – be it from private companies or development funds - quickly and at the grassroots level in a way that other bureaucratic institutions cannot.[16] If there is private funding for reconstruction, it can profit local companies and build capital locally, and ensure all jobs and skills development is kept within the local population. International public development funding, on the other hand, has tended to swamp out many of these benefits, especially when profits go to international contractors and there is little skills exchange.

Inclusiveness is Everything

The more parties involved in stabilization the greater the likelihood of success. Some approaches to stabilization, such as that taken by the UK, recommend to its officials and decision-makers that taking *"unpalatable, immediate choices about who we need to work with"* is critical to success.

For Syria, this may mean some difficult decisions. If international actors prioritize what Syrians view as the basis of stability first and foremost – which is different in different parts of the country – then international actors must be prepared to involve, perhaps only temporarily, actors that are currently excluded. In Somalia, US counter-terrorism law has for a long time impeded the effective delivery of humanitarian relief – which can be a vehicle for stability, albeit unintentionally[17]. Recognizing how insurgencies, such as al Shabaab in Somalia and the Taliban in Afghanistan, in part grew out of bottom-up demand to reduce corruption and improve trade and commerce is critical. Including the needs of local businesses in building a vision of stability is slo important to avoiding the resurgence of militants.

The other pressure to reduce inclusiveness in Syria may come from Assad. As one Chatham House report notes, "*there is a risk that the West could become entangled in a web of political trade-offs in which economic aid is made conditional on concessions from Assad, while Assad seeks to make cooperation on the political settlement and in combating Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) conditional on his receiving economic support.*"[18] The report suggests that in the event of a partial transition where some of the Assad regime remains intact there would not be a sufficient basis for planning a long-term reconstruction program in which financial institutions could play a substantive role. The pragmatic channeling of aid through multi-lateral agencies or direct budgetary support would need to be contingent on strict cease-fire monitoring, transparency and increasing political inclusion.

Stabilization includes rebuilding relationships between the state, the group and the individual, as well as embracing a variety of ideas about increased democratic expression. At the most local level, such an approach can be relatively free from national and international power games, and is essential to brokering peace.

When is "Good Enough"?

Factoring timelines into stabilization planning and implementation matters. Time is as valuable a resource as coercive force, technical skill or funding. In plans it is rarely explicitly referred to as a dwindling resource. Making sure a strategy for stabilization is achievable, and relating that to timescales, seems to be a significant lesson from Afghanistan and Iraq.

That the Taliban had the time, while the Western powers had the watch, was a cliché from the intervention in Afghanistan. Yet, it reflects several truths. Different actors can afford to "wait" for change over different periods, and Western democratic governments have to act under huge constraints from their own domestic constituencies. Managing the interaction of costs (political and financial), time and progress becomes a central part of modern day interventions with an overriding imperative to show that "we are winning", whether or not that is the reality.

Few international interventions are open ended. RAF photo. Copyright Crown 2014

The impatience of certain actors can lead to a range of unintended consequences, in particular the incentive to rush in and expend resources early on, partly knowing that donor funds available will wane over time.

Alongside the capability to deploy resources, force and political influence, the time for which an actor, or different actors, can intervene is a crucial factor in devising an effective stabilization strategy. Very few international interventions are open-ended. The waning domestic political resolve in democratic countries deploying armed forces to Afghanistan and Iraq made it clear that this resolve is dynamic and contingent on a sense of necessity and utility.

Identifying those actors - state and non-state, private and public – who can sustain the deployment of stabilization capability over the necessary period is critical, especially in today's environment of constrained public resources amongst traditional donors.

It will Take Longer than we Think

Previous stabilization planning has often proved more aspirational than realistic, particularly in terms of the timescale involved in local populations seeing the results of a transformed conflict. An internal assessment of lessons learned from stabilization interventions in Afghanistan, Iraq and Libya asserts that *"overly ambitious and unrealistic goals were set."*[19] For Syria, the US Government last year referred to a three-year campaign to degrade ISIL.[20] More recently, it has become clearer that the process will take longer, especially in the context of addressing what would fill the vacuum left behind by a dispersed, if not strategically defeated, ISIL.

Transformation and the creation of peace takes significant time, as does altering the economies of a conflict. While the "surge" of deployed troops and other resources in Afghanistan and Iraq may have provided a temporary lull to enable the withdrawal of forces, it is becoming clear that short-term spikes of effort are rarely sufficient to bring about sustainable stability.

Among Western international partners, generating understanding of what cannot be achieved in a short timeframe is critical to building the policy space for decisions that can create sustainable peace.

Complexity is Time Consuming and Requires Strategic Patience

Practitioners and policy-makers of stabilization, when faced with tight deadlines for delivery and a highly complex scenario, can be pressured to take shortcuts. One analysis of lessons from Iraq, Afghanistan and Lebanon identified how mistakes can be made and recommended to "*above all, prioritise security and stability before any meaningful reform, reconstruction, or rehabilitation takes place*."[21] Essential phases in the conflict resolution process need to be resolved *before* institutions are strengthened, roles are created and power is distributed in such a way that reinforces drivers of instability.

Reducing the many levels of conflict in Syria today – involving as it does regional rivalry, identity and religious rivalry, resource and territorial tensions – to a primary narrative about international terrorism does not assist in setting good long term policy. Public attention, resources, and international organizations need to reflect and respond to complexity, especially when a conflict becomes multi-dimensional.

The focus must be on reconstructing an inclusive national identity which connects to the local. This takes time and can neither be hurried or avoided. Evidence shows that starting with the existing constitutional arrangement may help with the transition.[22] In the longer run, the building of national ideas and values, while embracing diversity, can lead to constitutional debate and reform, and provides the solid foundations of stability. Setting timelines, such as those laid out in the Geneva communiqués on Syria, may assist in driving forward reform and progress, as witnessed in the development of peace initiatives and government-making in Somalia in recent years.[23] Bestowing international legitimacy and recognition on governments that have not yet built domestic effectiveness and legitimacy can be problematic for stability, and discourage nascent governments from responding to their domestic constituencies. Western decision-makers must be prepared to forego what might appear "quick wins" in the short term and rather create the time to build sustainable peace.

Extending central authority, especially when backed with armed force and against the will of local populations, has been shown to be a strong driver of instability in Afghanistan, Somalia, Nigeria and Iraq.[24] Finding ways to support Syrians to take the long journey towards constitutional, consensual government is critical. A gradual process of increasing the plurality and reach of central government, in parallel to enabling bottom-up processes of stabilization, is preferred to making single "winner takes all" elections. A constitutional government needs to be nationally based in group values, before it exercises state authority and a monopoly on legal violence, can protect individuals and manage society, and distribute power and resources. The process of dialogue, drafting and refinement just cannot be rushed.

Building a New Vision

Few can question that ISIL has been immensely powerful in projecting an idea locally, regionally and internationally. That is reflected in the Global Coalition's focus on countering the group's propaganda as one of the 5 strands of its campaign.[25] Using violence, the group has positioned itself adeptly as a brutal revolutionary movement in opposition to what Syrians perceive to be a corrupt and repressive regime. To its international followers it is seeking to prove a concept; that a Caliphate can be established and that it would succeed were there not a Western-led coalition to remove it.

Perhaps more so than compared to previous conflicts, there is a real recognition that military force alone will not defeat ISIL. US government and international policy focuses its strategic thinking on two negatives: a transition away from Assad and the defeat of ISIL. There is a conspicuous and substantial absence of a public dialogue, primarily amongst Syrians but also other regional, and non-state stakeholders, about what the positive alternative is.

A vision for stabilization must speak to Syrians' understanding of stability, legitimacy and national identity. This is more than an academic exercise. One analysis of lessons learned from conflicts in Afghanistan, Iraq and Libya has emphasized the significance of what can be called "soft" reconstruction, which includes political dimensions such as building a national identity, focusing on local needs, building inclusivity, and creating broad buy-in.[26] Moreover, there is a suggestion that business, investment and commerce can and should drive political and economic reform, not the other way around. To make stabilization viable, it must concretely work with people's lives and address their immediate governance, security and basic material needs on their terms.

"Soft" and "hard" reconstruction need to both be present and work together. Too many recent interventions have talked too much about ambitious "soft" reconstruction ideas and failed to deliver "hard" reconstruction effectively. Both need to be at the center of a vision for a future Syria, set by Syrians.

However much the interventions in Iraq and Afghanistan talked about putting Iraqis and Afghans in the driver's seat, the fundamentals of the interventions were dictated by international agendas. The technocratic perspective created state-centric models of stabilization which placed creating institutions above growing networks, public sector development over enabling the private sector, militarized force over political relations, and central authority over local governance.

Make it Syrian

UN Security Council Resolution 2254 straightforwardly proclaims that "the Syrian people will decide the future of Syria". What it is to be Syrian, despite the international community's consensus around Syria's territorial integrity, is profoundly unclear given the de facto control of territory by ISIL, the Kurdish question and the proportion of Syria's population that are refugees. In the original protests against Bashar al Assad, as part of a broader Arab Spring in the Muslim world and the emergence of Daesh's announcement of a caliphate, it is clear that the very concept of statehood and relations with the people are the central areas of contention.

That both Afghanistan and Iraq today appear far more fractured than when international forces initially intervened requires the international intervention in Syria to raise more questions and broaden the debate rather than instill assumptions. Discussions among the International Syria Support Group and the Geneva communiqués may have initiated expressions of what a future political vision for Syria might look like but they are about formal structures of power rather than the tangible character of a nation.

One lesson from Afghanistan and Iraq is that we must not define the meaning of stability externally and certainly not as a result of Western or geo-politics. International objectives need to be subordinated to what works inside the country. In "Post Conflict Syrian State and Nation Building,"[27] the authors held workshops with many leading Syrian opposition leaders, analysts and thinkers. One of the key findings emphasized the need to develop Syrian identity further, in whatever direction that goes. In Afghanistan that process was left too late. It was only in 2011, when the strategic imperative to withdraw became urgent, that extra rigor was placed on following what could be called truly Afghan-led initiatives. [28]

Syrian refugees will need a voice in Syria's future. Photo ©UNHCR/Andrew McConnell

What Syrians want, and need, has been an explicit concern of many policy-makers on Syria. Undoubtedly, in the midst of a deep-seated and rapidly evolving conflict, and with a significant proportion of the Syrian population displaced outside the country, that is a challenging task. Yet it remains an important frame of reference. One of the critical, uncontentious lessons of the Iraq War has been summarized as "Don't listen to ambitious exiles."[29] The wholesale import of foreign values, investment and companies into a fragile state can be a significant source of instability as it strains national cultural consensus and cohesion.

Promoting women's rights was a major agenda point for the international intervention in Afghanistan. Amongst conservatives in Afghanistan that became a driver of instability, but – done carefully – there is an instrumental basis for understanding how women can contribute to peacemaking. The UK sees a strong role in its approach to stabilization for representing and protecting women,[30] and has a statutory requirement to assess gender issues, at least with regards to what is deemed international development.[31] The White House US National Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security has created strong leadership within the US Government on the issue, though it does not set mandatory policy.[32]

Make it Positive

The Global Coalition against ISIL has agreed on the military objective of the "defeat of ISIL." To transform the conflict in Syria, this is entirely insufficient. A positive political vision of what comes next needs to create confidence and direction that there is an alternative to conflict. To date, the Geneva Communiqué[33] and Vienna statement[34] are frameworks in which a peaceful alternative to conflict can grow. In the lead up to the Geneva II talks in February 2014, the opposition released a vision for the Transitional Governing Body. Yet, in today's world of flat, accessible connections, the international community has to play a larger role in enabling a Syrian conversation about political, social and economic ideas.

A serious discussion of substantial political, social and economic ideas needs to be initiated, alongside any talk of defeat and destruction. The structure of peace is detailed in the five "End States," as listed above, referred to in the Guiding Principles. Democratic elections are not one of the End States and the problem of over-emphasizing electoral democracy was put succinctly by CSIS: *"The US confused holding elections and creating new formal structures of central government with actual effective governance and political accommodation and stability."*[35] The paper goes further describing how a flawed approach can generate instability:

> *"Its approach to instant democracy and unrealistic approaches to the rule of law and development rather than meeting popular needs laid much of the groundwork for failure in both countries [Iraq and Afghanistan} and helped to empower both insurgencies."*

The needs of local populations can often be assumed, or misrepresented by spoilers, rather than objectively assessed. Those needs might be about the most basic commercial and economic patterns of life, including the movement of goods and people. Syria's reconstruction will likely need to be a matter of grassroots confidence so that workers, goods and investment can combine. ISIL's method and strategy has been linked to the semblance of a manifesto for political violence and authority.[36] They posit ideas, and demonstrate their values, in a relatively coherent and brutal fashion through action, literature and video.

Work has been done on developing rebels' the anti-Assad agenda into a better understood and positive manifesto. This area of politics would benefit from greater attention. Building an alternative vision for Syrian stability requires a greater degree of political communication than international communiqués alone, and should be sourced in Syrian history, commerce and culture.

Make it Vocal

A public debate amongst Syrians about what a stable future looks like – including those in Syria and displaced around the world – is one that can eventually lead towards a developed political framework and constitutional reform. The Geneva Communiqué lays out formal processes and structures of governance but, as one would expect at such an early stage, does not substantively deal with issues of statehood, legal sources of authority, social values and group relationships. Some of these concepts are heavily contested, some are entirely novel to Syria, which is why the debate needs to start sooner rather than later. Political debate itself supports the sort of legitimate, people-based government that is being sought, not least among many Syrians.

The International Peace Institute refers to the importance of "soft" rebuilding, in particular the idea of "national identity."[37] Enabling Syrians to debate their future within a regional context is a critical way of reducing the damaging impact of external interference. There is tremendous potential for carrying this out using technology to reach Syrians globally in the digital age and it would extend debate beyond the selection of representatives of armed actors contributing to the Geneva peace process.

Businesses, commerce and the local economy are often under-mentioned aspects of stabilization. They appear secondary to security and governance, and development projects. Counter-insurgency operations in Somalia and Afghanistan that have disrupted and separated urban populations from rural sources of labor, agriculture and road networks have been particularly damaging. Seeking to destroy Afghanistan's opium crop and replacing it with barely subsistence crops was disastrous for local livelihoods and stability.

The private sector may also hold untapped potential for the purposes of stabilization. Private (sometimes diaspora) investors are among a new set of stakeholders for stability in Mogadishu, especially after al Shabaab left the capital of Somalia in 2011. Their confidence, risk and willingness to invest in reconstruction has led to a greater sense of security, not vice versa. There is much to be learned from that.

Aligning Objectives

The challenge in any stabilization environment is to align all effort – political, security and developmental – in a unified direction, with a common assessment of what the drivers of instability are. That has proved immensely difficult across all the components of large-scale, multi-national interventions.

Alongside development, security presents certain challenges. There is a growing concern that the two parallel US policy objectives – the counter-ISIL campaign and search for Syrian transition – are moving apart.[38] Globally, theaters of counter-terrorism operations continue to overlap with regions of instability,[39] and it remains clear how the two objectives will be mutually supportive in the coming years.

The counter-ISIL coalition seems targeted on tackling a symptom and is looking to a high-level peace agreement to the question, "what next?" Even then, peace agreements – such as Afghanistan's Bonn Agreement in 2001 – rarely provide a complete resolution to violence, and engagement from the bottom-up is often necessary. Stabilization is not a one-time process.

Syria did not explode into violence because of extremism on its own. Rather, World Bank data reveals the impact Assad's policies have had on impoverishing the country and provides the background to popular demonstrations in 2011.[40]

Pushed by external actors, the imperative for rapid delivery of development projects can itself be de-stabilizing. Locally-led investment that expresses and spreads confidence, and that creates a stakeholder with an interest in peace, is far more effective. But so can counter-terrorism policies and operations. Counter-terrorism has been a consistent central feature of modern interventions, yet it is entirely absent from the stabilization planning documents of several international partners. Considering this, stabilization officials are fully aware of how detrimental counter-terrorism can be to stability.

Agree What the Problem is

For many years in Afghanistan, ISAF conducted stabilization operations under international mandate in parallel to a pre-eminent counter-terrorism mission led by the US military: Operation Enduring Freedom. At various points, the international objectives in Afghanistan included counter-terrorism, counter-insurgency, counter-narcotics, developmental and nation-building. There was regular confusion, overlap and conflict between the aims of different agencies of the US Government, which not only undermined the intended impact but tended to feed instability.

Within intervening governments there are often strong and culturally-led differences of opinion about where the problem lies, and because of the difficult security environment in Syria, there is considerable risk in relying on a small number of actors. The imperative to align objectives requires difficult decisions to be made, especially between USAID and the Department of Defense, and coherent priorities to be set. Getting organization of intervening institutions – especially of Western governments - in better shape must happen before significant stabilization resources are deployed.

"*A first step toward a more effective and coordinated response to help states prevent, mitigate and recover from violent conflict is the development of shared understanding among USG agencies about the sources of violent conflict or civil strife,"* says the Inter-Agency Conflict Assessment Framework (ICAF), published in 2008. This sort of approach needs to be robustly implemented within the US Government, and amongst international partners, if there is to be a unified effect in Syria.

At the end of 2014, senior US military leadership openly admitted they did not understand what the movement called ISIL stood for.[41] Analysis has certainly progressed, but spending so much effort on what has been called the "symptom, and not the disease" distracts international effort away from tackling the complex, real underlying causes of instability.

Integrated, Civilian-led Approach

Civilian-military cooperation in stabilization operations has been cited as a self-evident lesson from recent conflicts, yet continues to be difficult to implement.[42] The use of coercive force has rarely been successfully aligned with the "soft" tools of stabilization, including short-term deployment of funds, development initiatives, security agreements and other political influencing activities. Even harder have been initiatives to subordinate military force under locally-situated civilian leadership, although it was attempted among Provincial Reconstruction Teams in Afghanistan.

The story of a creating an integrated stabilization and post-conflict reconstruction plan for the Helmand Provincial Reconstruction Team, in southern Afghanistan, is but one story of delay and missteps, where there has been strategic incoherence between the local and national levels.[43] At the technical level, integrating stabilization capability means the exchange of personnel and sharing information between government agencies and institutions, but also involves a lot more. A US Institute of Peace report specifies the ramifications for stability when there is a lack of unity of effort between civilian and military actors, saying it has *"severely hampered the nation-building process, allowing power brokers to maintain their strongholds; creating more opportunity for corruption; and preventing the establishment of sustainable, national institutions."*[44] Getting institutions with entirely different mindsets to think coherently together, and subordinating military command to political effect and local leadership, can be near impossible.

The State Department's stabilization team for Syria has been subsumed within the Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs and finds itself in an isolated position in the policy-making discussions on Syria, according to one interviewee. The UK approach is at best some sort of politically mediated resolution, yet it finds itself constrained by its international mandate and domestic framing.

Be Realistic and Clarify the Outcome

It is not entirely clear what the "ultimate defeat" of ISIL would look like, especially as we can expect the idea behind the ISIL's activities, operations and organization to morph. Even if we were to see territorial defeat for terrorist groupings, it is unclear what impact asymmetric attacks launched by an ISIL or Nusra insurgency could have. Military leaders might define defeat in terms of strategic irrelevance, but that does not preclude regular attacks or general political instability. Removal of individuals or even the fracturing of a non-state organization does not necessarily provide stability.

Removal of non-state armed groups from a territory does not itself mean victory. The Afghan Taliban maintained immense strength through the strategic depth of the border areas inside Pakistan. The removal of ISIL even from Raqqa does not necessarily make their claim and offering irrelevant. It could be argued that ISIL's "caliphate" exists as much online as it does in territorial form. Though there is much variance in their manifestations, ISIL does lay claim to ten "provinces" in the Middle East, North and West Africa.

By the many public pronouncements by countries participating in stability operations, it may appear that the indices of success are about the size of a trained army or the number of schools rebuilt. There can be impressive scale of reconstruction output but it is not an indicator of peace and stability, as Afghanistan and Iraq demonstrate today. Some analysts expect a patchwork of ceasefires to arise under, variously regime, rebel and ISIL control, perhaps fixed together under an overall UN mandate.

Displacing ISIL from its territorial base in Syria and Iraq, while also destroying the leadership and financial foundations, may be a start but does not equate to stability. When al Shabaab vacated its conventional frontline in Mogadishu in 2011, it turned to guerilla operations while also maintaining a strong degree of political influence, like many other insurgencies. Being clear about the outcome and connecting it to a picture of stability is critical to generating and maintaining support for the mission.

Focus on Quality

Interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq included the deployment of large multi-national coalitions, huge budgets, and training large-scale national security forces. Today, the State Department's Bureau of Conflict and Stabilization Operations talks more about a carefully small footprint, and "turnkey" stabilization solutions.[45]

The creation of the Global Coalition against ISIL in some senses looks like a return to the past in the desire to establish widespread international legitimacy through a large and disparate collection of allies. Analyses of the efficacy of the ISAF/NATO alliance in Afghanistan highlighted the considerable problems involved in large-scale coalitions.[46] Numbers do not equate to either the strength or power of an alliance, and that is especially true if key actors are missing.

The first year of the anti-ISIS coalition was focused on getting 66 entities pointing in the same direction. Interviewees have highlighted the difficulty of aligning partners with an operational strategy across such a broad coalition. Despite the remarkably quick establishment of this large number of contributors there is questionable political buy-in from key members. And events since the Global Coalition was established reveal how the critical involvement of players like Russia and Iran may be more significant the number of members.

In the development sphere, high quality stabilization and reconstruction does not necessarily mean grand projects. Many projects in Afghanistan and Iraq were about fantastic overreach, not least the $300 million wasted failing to reconstruct the Kajaki dam in southern Afghanistan, which was meant to light up an entire province. Smaller can often be better. In Somalia, after al Shabaab vacated the city in 2011, while international partners and the nascent Somali government argued about stabilization plans, funding and mandate, many returning diaspora members and other investors helped kick-start the reconstruction process. It has proved difficult to measure, but the large numbers of returning Somalis to Mogadishu in particular have helped bring investment, skills, trading contacts – and stability – to a war-torn capital.[47]

The Kajaki Dam in Afghanistan is seen as a colossal waste of reconstruction funds. USAID photo

Conclusion

There is no doubt that Syria presents a highly uncertain and difficult environment for achieving any foreign policy objective, let alone something as challenging as building the foundations for long term stability. It is evident from the interventions in Afghanistan, Iraq, Somalia and elsewhere that, when the time comes, stabilization capacity of a qualitatively different kind for Syria would need to be deployed. Not only in terms of its country of origin but also in terms of it being sustained, multi-dimensional and integrated. The legacy of those interventions has deeply impacted the willingness of Western populations to become involved in another Middle East conflict so much that a different approach is inevitable. It is also needed if the US Government and international partners want a qualitatively different outcome from those interventions which have failed to secure stability.

Setting achievable, coherent goals – according to the realms of the resources available - and meshing a wealth of international institutions remains highly challenging but still requires strong engagement from the US Government and international partners, albeit focusing on diplomatic influence. Creatively empowering and enabling a range of actors – including the regional and private sector – and setting a direction is immensely important to the US Government, counter-terrorism and stabilization objectives.

Despite the modest number of analysts, government and military officials interviewed for this paper it is clear that there remains lessons from very recent interventions which are only being partially addressed. No one lesson of stabilization is more important than the others. Many of the factors are mutually reinforcing, or undermining. It is as the complexity, risks and difficulties mount that a realistic, coherent and comprehensive strategy becomes all the more important. In light of what has happened in Mogadishu, reconstruction *is* stabilization when it grows the circle of stability stakeholders who are invested in peace, provides jobs and builds confidence in the future.

Planning how to build a state from a far-flung capital does not work, however skilled, well-resourced or well-intentioned the technocrat is. Localisation is everything. Understanding and working from the local neighborhood up is how sustainable stability grows. And that is where the longest resolve to grow peace can be found. In contrast, it remains entirely unclear as to how the intensifying internationalized war against ISIL will increase peace and stability for Syria. Should ISIL be removed from territory in Iraq and Syria it is entirely unclear what stable system will fill the vacuum.

Reconstructing national identity has been an under-emphasized priority in recent attempts to reconstruct fragile states. In a scenario such as Syria, there will need to be a lot of "letting go" in terms of the nature of pluralism and developing democratization. The vision for how a stable future and a nation made up of diverse communities can emerge needs to be initiated early on and rooted internally, rather than depend on international ideologies and agendas.

Stabilization is seen as much more than a technocratic or developmental exercise; it is now described by officials as a deeply political exercise. Yet, it is more than just formal structures of government and navigating local political economies. It is about building an entire country's vision of its future. This has to be done from the local level upwards – not by foreign actors – and creating momentum in public debate is an area where the US and its democratic partners have considerable advantage. Just as modern technology is proving useful in mapping conflicts, so too can communications platforms and social media offer opportunities to innovatively generate conversations about the future of Syria. Amidst the conflict, that public debate is much needed.

Syria is raising new questions about what stabilization looks like, and who will be involved. There will need to be new actors – including private sector investors - and regional donors taking a lead. It is interesting to consider how the Somali refugees that settled in Europe and North America in the 1990s today provide one source of skills and investment for the current wave of reconstruction in Somalia, as many diaspora return to their country of origin.[48] With appropriate influence from the international community, regional actors and non-state actors can be contributors towards stability.

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