



Two destroyed tanks in front of a mosque in Azaz, Syria. A battle between the Free Syrian Army and the Syrian Arab Army was fought from March to July in 2012 for control over the city of Azaz, north of Aleppo, during the Syrian civil war. (Christian Triebert)

# Post–Conflict Stabilization

## What Can We Learn from Syria?

By Michael Ratney

Reflecting upon a decade of writing on post–conflict stabilization efforts and U.S. efforts to develop and improve stabilization capabilities, one thing becomes clear: the Iraq and Afghanistan experiences have deeply informed U.S. Government (USG) views and the U.S. military’s stabilization doctrine. And yet, Iraq and Afghanistan may be the exceptions, and quite unlike the conflicts in which the United States may find itself involved in the future.

At the risk of oversimplification, in both Iraq and Afghanistan, the United States effected the overthrow of a central government—Saddam Hussein’s Ba’athist state in Iraq and the Taliban-controlled government in Afghanistan—and set about to stabilize and rebuild legitimate, internationally recognized, and capable governments in their place. In both Iraq and Afghanistan, the decision to get involved—to launch a military operation that sought initially to bring about regime change but which evolved into a much longer-term conflict and commitment—was ours, and the eventual U.S. military and financial investment was substantial.

The war in Syria that began in 2011 presented a new model of the sort of conflicts into which the United States may be drawn, and challenged the efficacy of our tools and doctrine designed for stabilization. In particular, the Syria conflict presents a more complicated scenario in which U.S. stabilization efforts take place in the midst of an ongoing civil conflict and where the United States must deal with an array of non-state actors rather than a central government. Further, U.S. stabilization efforts in Syria were consistently challenged not by under-resourced insurgents, but by an internationally recognized government with key foreign allies. In these ways and no doubt others, Syria contains many of the ambiguous, multifarious, and chaotic elements that may characterize the 21<sup>st</sup> century conflicts in which our country may become involved—and for which our military and civilian agencies should be prepared.

What characterizes the Syria experience is that unlike other conflict-afflicted situations, in which we have worked to empower a central state to assume the functions of governance, in Syria we have worked to disempower the central state and stabilize areas outside the central government’s control. This suggests that in addition to state-centric and counterinsurgent approaches to stabilization, the United States must also

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contemplate non-state-centric and pro-insurgent approaches to stabilization. Compared to more traditional stabilization efforts, stabilization in situations where the United States does not have the option of working with the internationally recognized central government requires:

- a potentially enduring military commitments and security guarantees;
- robust economic assistance by some party; and
- a high tolerance for working with non-state actors, which act as proto-state entities that substitute for the central government (and which have their own agendas that may ultimately be counter to U.S. political objectives).

### **Building Doctrine on Iraq and Afghanistan**

The U.S. experience in Iraq and Afghanistan has spawned numerous books, articles, and commentary on America's role in post-conflict stabilization and reconstruction. Much of this literature focuses less on the peculiarities of various conflicts and more on the tools and organizational structures the USG needs to respond effectively. In 2004, for example, the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) published a book-length anthology, "Winning the Peace, An American Strategy for Post-Conflict Reconstruction," that focused principally on building the USG's institutional capacity to respond effectively in the aftermath of conflicts.<sup>1</sup> The authors argued, *inter alia*, for greater civilian response capacity, training and funding for post-conflict stabilization efforts, and the need to enlist allies and ensure bipartisan consensus on U.S. initiatives. In 2005, during what emerged as a high point in U.S. stabilization and reconstruction efforts in Iraq, a Council on Foreign Relations (CFR) Task Force produced another set of practical recommendations for improving U.S. post-conflict capabilities.<sup>2</sup> Although the report draws on

experiences beyond Iraq and Afghanistan, including Kosovo, Bosnia, and Haiti, it is clear that those first two, very difficult, years of the Iraq conflict weighed heavily on the Task Force recommendations, which point to weak states as a source of threats to our own national security. Like the CSIS anthology, the CFR recommendations focus on ensuring that USG agencies, military and civilian alike, are adequately resourced and sufficient importance is accorded to reconstruction and stabilization efforts.

Many recommendations of the CSIS strategy and the CFR Task Force were implemented, and in 2008—still three years before the outbreak of violence in Syria—the U.S. Department of Defense (DOD) published the detailed and comprehensive U.S. Army Field Manual on Stability Operations 3–07 (and the reissued DOD Instruction 3000.05 in 2009, and Joint Publication JP 3–07 in 2016).<sup>3</sup> Not surprisingly, that document also draws heavily on the U.S. experiences in Iraq and Afghanistan.

In Syria, as in Iraq and Afghanistan, the United States became progressively more involved in a complicated stabilization effort. By 2017, scholars and practitioners both inside and outside government asked what lessons could be taken from Iraq and Afghanistan, even as our engagement in those two countries continued and new conflicts emerged.<sup>4</sup> One report from 2017 by the CSIS about "Stabilization in Syria: Lessons from Afghanistan and Iraq," zeroed in on some key features of the Syria conflict:

*The United States faces a fragmented country without a single national authority to partner with . . . opposition groups are weak and fractured, unlikely to coalesce as a viable national alternative to the current government. The atomization of Syrian society proves an additional obstacle to sustainable stabilization efforts, without a local framework to house development and governance initiatives once U.S. and coalition assistance decreases or ceases to exist.<sup>5</sup>*

Recognizing that reality, this year the U.S. Department of State, DOD, and U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) released “A Framework for Maximizing the Effectiveness of U.S. Government Efforts to Stabilize Conflict-Affected Areas”—an assessment that consciously looks beyond Iraq and Afghanistan, taking in the U.S. experience of eight very diverse conflicts from Asia, Africa, and the Middle East. Like other attempts to distill a set of lessons learned, the report prioritizes coordinated efforts among all the USG elements—defense, diplomatic, development—as well as with international partners, to maximize effectiveness of stabilization operations.

These studies, while welcome and useful, suffer from two shortcomings. First, they take certain structural elements of our missions in Iraq and Afghanistan for granted. Namely, the studies assume a situation in which the United States will work to strengthen the legitimacy and capabilities of an internationally recognized central government, effectively mixing elements of state- and institution-building. The Syria experience, however, suggests that the requirements of stabilization may be different when the United States is not working with a central government. And second, many of these reports tended to avoid analysis of the specific characteristics of the areas in which stabilization operations would be conducted and how those local conditions affect our choice of strategies and tools, the level of resources required, and the specific challenges we would face if we choose to get involved.

### Are These Countries Alike?

On some levels, Syria does resemble Iraq and Afghanistan. It is a fragile state with weak governance. Each has terrorist and insurgent groups, both homegrown and foreign, that threaten the United States and our allies. Tribal groups with diverse and sometimes shifting loyalties play a critical role in state stabilization, particularly in

outlying areas. In all three cases, state breakdown has led to a mass exodus of refugees and internally displaced persons, warlordism, and wartime economies. And religion and sectarianism weigh heavily on societies in all three countries and aggravate efforts to promote stabilization.

U.S. stabilization objectives in Syria are also similar to those in Iraq and Afghanistan. The U.S. Army Stability Operations Field Manual (and the later JP 3-07 “Stability”) state that these operations are called upon to “reduce the drivers of conflict and instability and build local institutional capacity to forge sustainable peace, security, and economic growth.” Phrased slightly differently, we undertake stabilization assistance in fragile post-conflict environments to help mitigate the security threats to the United States and our allies that could emanate from those areas—particularly terrorism and refugee flows; and to create conditions in which the conflict can ultimately be resolved, ideally through a peaceful political settlement.

It is worth reviewing more specifically how the United States defined its overall objectives in Afghanistan and Iraq, and how they informed our stabilization objectives, to get a better sense of how Syria is different.

### *Afghanistan*

Although there may be a perception that the U.S. mission in Afghanistan has grown, our objectives have actually remained fairly stable. U.S. intervention began with the objectives set forth by President George W. Bush in his speech on October 7, 2001:

*By destroying camps and disrupting communication, we will make it more difficult for the terror network to train new recruits and coordinate their evil plans. Initially, the terrorists may burrow deeper into caves and other entrenched hiding places. Our military action is also designed to clear*

*the way for sustained, comprehensive and relentless operations to drive them out and bring them to justice. At the same time, the oppressed people of Afghanistan will know the generosity of America and our allies. As we strike military targets, we will also drop food, medicine and supplies to the starving and suffering men and women and children of Afghanistan.*<sup>6</sup>

In other words, U.S. intervention began as a fairly narrow counterterrorism mission supported by humanitarian assistance. However, by the time the U.S. National Security Strategy was issued in September of 2002—the first update since the start of U.S. major combat operations in Afghanistan—our objectives were defined more expansively, encompassing not only counterterrorism and

humanitarian aid, but also reconstruction and state-building:

*As we pursue the terrorists in Afghanistan, we will continue to work with international organizations such as the United Nations, as well as non-governmental organizations, and other countries to provide the humanitarian, political, economic, and security assistance necessary to rebuild Afghanistan so that it will never again abuse its people, threaten its neighbors, and provide a haven for terrorists.*<sup>7</sup>

By November of that year, the coalition of countries involved in Afghanistan, principally through the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF), had broadened considerably; we had begun establishing interagency (though military-led) Provincial



In 2011, a U.S. marine greets local children during a partnered security patrol with Afghan National Army soldiers in Helmand Province, Afghanistan. The marines aided Afghan National Security Forces in assuming security responsibilities; their interoperability is designed to further the expansion of stability, development, and legitimate governance by defeating insurgent forces and helping to secure the Afghan people. (DOD)

Reconstruction Teams throughout the country; and the value of various U.S. economic assistance programs in Afghanistan had grown to nearly a billion dollars.<sup>8</sup> From that point forward, U.S. objectives remained relatively constant, and the assistance resources we brought to bear remained substantial. As of this year, the U.S. objective remains a “stable and self-reliant Afghanistan” and our civilian assistance goals are ambitious and diverse, targeting the empowerment of the country’s central government.<sup>9</sup> Specifically,

*helping the Afghan government to better serve Afghan citizens by supporting efforts to boost the transparency and accountability of its institutions and management, make government processes more efficient, improve public outreach, enhance financial management, and strengthen the linkages between central and subnational levels of government.*<sup>10</sup>

### **Iraq**

U.S. objectives in Iraq were initially defined in President Bush’s speech on March 17, 2003, which gave then Iraqi President Saddam Hussein a final ultimatum to leave the country or face military action, which began two days later. Like Afghanistan, U.S. objectives in Iraq were driven by U.S. national security—i.e. countering the threats that Saddam Hussein’s Iraq posed to the United States and our allies. And similar to Afghanistan, a humanitarian assistance mission followed. But unlike Afghanistan, we signaled early on that Iraq would also have a state-building mission.

*If we must begin a military campaign, it will be directed against the lawless men who rule your country and not against you. As our coalition takes away their power, we will deliver the food and medicine you need. We*

*will tear down the apparatus of terror and we will help you to build a new Iraq that is prosperous and free.*<sup>11</sup>

Much has been written about the absence of advance preparation for what became a costly nation-building effort that lasted more than a decade. A RAND study from 2003 about “America’s Role in Nation-Building from Germany to Iraq” is among the most comprehensive, particularly at that early phase of the U.S. intervention.

*Over the past decade, the United States has made major investments in the combat efficiency of its forces. The return on investment has been evident in the dramatic improvement in warfighting demonstrated from Desert Storm to the Kosovo air campaign to Operation Iraqi Freedom. There has been no comparable increase in the capacity of U.S. armed forces or of U.S. civilian agencies to conduct post-combat stabilization and reconstruction operations.*<sup>12</sup>

As of this year, our objectives in Iraq remain a “long-term strategic partnership with Iraq as an independent state.”<sup>13</sup> Although a few observers have posited the likelihood or even desirability of a formally partitioned Iraq, we continue to support development of a capable Iraqi national government, albeit in the context of a commitment to decentralization.<sup>14</sup>

### **What is Different about Syria?**

Not only is the conflict in Syria more complex than most others, but the policies driving the U.S. response are also different. The United States’ initial involvement in Syria was restricted to political (and later material) support for the popular uprising that began in 2011 against the government of Bashar al-Assad. Although the United States linked Assad’s rule with the empowerment of terrorists, and thus

considered it a threat to U.S. national security, U.S. military involvement in Syria did not begin in earnest until late 2014. At that time, the United States began conducting air strikes against the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) and Syrian-based affiliates of al-Qaeda.<sup>15</sup>

The United States, for much of the seven years of the Syria conflict, has had two parallel policies: to resolve the core regime-opposition conflict by pressuring the Assad regime via international ostracism of his government and support for the insurgency against it; and to defeat ISIL. The United States undertook civilian assistance, including stabilization and governance, in areas throughout the country controlled by Syrian opposition militias and other civilian insurgent governance bodies, as well as in areas recaptured from ISIL after 2014. Unlike post-2003 Iraq and Afghanistan—but not unlike 1991 Iraq in Operation *Provide Comfort*—in Syria, the United States undertook a stabilization mission with the express policy of keeping stabilized areas out of the clutches of a central state that covets them and is actively attempting to recapture them.

Thus, a key difference in Syria is the way we treat state authority. Most of the literature and doctrine on stabilization, including from the U.S. military, and much of our own post-conflict experience, prioritizes state sovereignty and authority. It presumes the goal and desirability of an empowered central state that can increasingly assume responsibility for state services, maintain security, and create conditions for a revival of productive economic activity.

In Syria, however, the United States has sought to keep territory outside the control of the central state and in the hands of non-state actors. Even in areas which the United States has worked to liberate from ISIL, we have sought to empower different non-state actors rather than the central government. The United States Government's local governance and security partners throughout the country have been rebels in insurrection against the central government

and/or seek to establish parallel governing structures partially disconnected from the state, at least until the national Syrian leadership changes. While as a matter of policy, the United States wishes to see a different leadership in Syria that it can support—i.e. a government not led by Assad and his cronies—the imperative for tangible steps toward stabilizing areas outside Syrian government control has outpaced the United States and the international community's ability to put in place a process, political or otherwise, that would bring about a change of regime.

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A second difference in Syria, therefore, is the variety and types of non-state authorities the United States has had to deal with as stabilization partners. In Syria, there are three principal areas outside of state control (excluding areas of residual ISIL control). The regional distinctions of the Syrian Democratic Force-, opposition-, and Turkish-controlled areas have emerged as the war has evolved and particularly as conflict lines have stabilized since 2017.

It is worth noting that none of these three regions is a legally recognized political or

administrative unit within Syria, which is still officially divided into 14 governorates or provinces. Even those local councils that have been established with external support in areas outside of state control are not necessarily indicative of Syria's eventual administrative structure, though their existence may influence future decisions. As in Iraq, regional affiliations and elements of local governance have become a reality on the ground that directly affects stabilization efforts. Also as in Iraq, for the United States and other foreign parties, the ultimate political objective remains a unitary state, even while the process by which regions within the country are knitted back into a Syrian whole remains uncertain.

Consequently, when addressing stabilization in Syria, two characteristics of territories held by non-state actors become relevant; structure and organization, and relationship with other actors, particularly the central government. Areas dominated by disorganized and fragmented non-state actors will be more difficult to stabilize; multiple competing parties, absence of a clear organizational structure, and multiple nodes of authority make it hard to allocate resources and implement projects efficiently. War aims—and the nature of the relationship with the government—also matter because they affect the kinds of pressures these areas will face, the space in which the United States has to work, and the nature of necessary security guarantees.

### *Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF)– Controlled Areas*

In northeast Syria, the focus of our defeat-ISIL campaign, U.S. forces have worked with a local militia—the SDF—and emerging local governance partners. At the center of the SDF is the Kurdish-dominated YPG, but the force comprises a large number of Arabs, Turkmen, and others. It is probably the most cohesive non-state actor in



A U.S. soldier in June stands on a mound before taking part in a handgun night fire range near the Iraq–Syria border. Iraqi Security Forces and Coalition partners provided fire support and continually work on combat skills to assist the Syrian Democratic Forces as they continued Operation *Roundup*, the military offensive to rid the final pockets of the ISIL terrorist organization from the Middle Euphrates River Valley in Syria. (U.S. Army/Anthony Zendejas IV)

Syria (possibly with the exception of ISIL), and the only one to enjoy a significant degree of U.S. military support. Although the principal function of U.S. forces in this area is to work by, with, and through SDF partners to eradicate ISIL, the U.S. presence also encourages stabilization by deterring attempts by ISIL, the Syrian regime, or other parties to assert unilateral control.<sup>16</sup> In that way, the U.S. military presence helps create conditions in which local governance functions, economic activity and some measure of normal life can resume.

The situation on the ground in these areas remains complex, with different local elements, including tribal groups, on a spectrum of relationships with the Syrian government, ranging from militant opposition to uneasy co-existence to full-on alliance. The SDF also has its own political agenda: to secure greater administrative autonomy for areas of Syria where it predominates. As such, it does not pose an existential threat to the Syrian government and does not necessarily demand regime change, though the SDF and the government are deeply at odds over the political future of areas under SDF control. The area remains economically fragile; although there is a degree of trade and other economic interaction with regime-controlled Syria, SDF-controlled areas are economically isolated by their antagonistic relationship with Turkey, the Kurdistan Regional Government in northern Iraq, and Syrian opposition-controlled areas further to the west.

### *Opposition-Controlled Areas*

Opposition factions have sought to capture power in Damascus and unseat the regime. They pose a structural threat to the Syrian government, and so both have been in intense and violent competition with one another. Armed factions of the Syrian opposition once controlled nearly 60 percent of Syrian territory but they lost ground, particularly after the Russian escalation in September 2015. As of October, opposition-controlled areas were largely limited to Idlib province, where multiple factions—some quite extreme—competed for control. Beginning in July 2017, stability in southwest Syria had been ensured by a ceasefire negotiated by the United States, Russia, and Jordan. During this period, which effectively ended with the fall of the area to regime forces this summer, the southwest had been the largest and most stable area of opposition control. Dubbed an interim de-escalation area, that ceasefire created a sufficient reduction

in violence such that local opposition-controlled bodies could provide at least some of the services of a central state. Absent normal economic relations with neighboring countries or with regime-controlled parts of Syria, the area remained highly dependent on foreign assistance. Because there were effectively no security guarantees, the stability of the region was dependent on the viability of the ceasefire and willingness of the regime and opposition to respect it. In the absence of a political agreement effectively ending the conflict, responsibility rested with signatories to the ceasefire document—United States, Jordan, and Russia—to restrain the belligerent parties.

### *Turkish-Controlled Areas*

In late 2016 and early 2017, the Turkish military in partnership with Syrian proxy forces (local Arab and Turkmen groups) launched Operation *Euphrates Shield* in Aleppo Governorate of northwestern Syria to clear ISIL and the Kurdish YPG from the area, and to establish what has effectively become a Turkish protectorate. The area is still referred to as Euphrates Shield after the name of the original military operation. Security and governance in this enclave are largely delegated to a discrete number of Turkish-supported Syrian armed opposition groups and affiliated political bodies at least nominally in opposition to the Assad regime. The Turkish military also maintains a presence, which helps maintain the cohesion of the local Syrian militias there and avoids the chaotic conditions found in Idlib province to the south. Security in Euphrates Shield is ultimately guaranteed by Turkey and, reportedly, by tacit understandings with Russia that the Syrian regime will not attempt to retake control of the area. In that sense, Euphrates Shield represents a hybrid arrangement combining both foreign military control and political agreement with the central government. The area has been

increasingly integrated into the Turkish economy, with Turkish banks and cell phone companies reportedly operating there.

### Is the Situation in Syria Unique?

The United States has been involved in other fragile and conflict-afflicted environments that contain similar elements and may inform future stabilization efforts.

#### *Somalia*

In Somalia in the 1990s, the United States worked with local powers (often little more than warlords) because there was no central state at all.<sup>17</sup> There was also an imperative to do so, both to mitigate the humanitarian crises and to address terrorism threats that threatened to coalesce.

Ken Menkhaus, a scholar who studied state collapse in Somalia extensively, has written about the challenges of conducting any sort of foreign assistance in such an environment. Despite what he has called “the most ambitious, costly, precedent-setting external stabilization operations in the post–Cold War period,” Somalia is “anything but stable.” Somalia may actually be the most extreme case of international stabilization operations in an environment in which the central state was not only absent at the local level, but was also for long periods effectively non-existent anywhere in the country. Since the fall of the Barre regime in the early 1990s and Somalia’s subsequent descent into anarchy, the United States and other donors have been forced to improvise, providing assistance in areas where the security conditions are more permissive and control does not rest in the hands of designated terrorist groups.

Even in the anarchy of Somalia, international efforts were long centered on creating and empowering a functional central government, notably the Transitional Federal Government (TFG) that governed in Somalia, in many areas just nominally, from 2004–12. Those efforts carried particular

challenges because humanitarian, stabilization, and counterterrorism objectives in Somalia (as in other conflict-afflicted areas) have at many times been at odds. Humanitarian aid is theoretically apolitical and directed wherever need exists regardless who is in control; stabilization assistance is inherently political, geared toward empowering desirable governing authorities and weakening undesirable ones; counterterrorism activities, because they address clear and present threats to us and our allies, often transcend all other considerations and so can unintentionally hamper other lines of effort.

In a country suffering from all manner of misfortune, including a virulent al-Qaeda-led insurgency, rampant corruption and criminality, and one of the worst famines in the past three decades, the absence of a central government may not have been Somalia’s principal problem. But the Somalia experience does illustrate the challenge of foreign parties bringing stability to a country when there is no legitimate indigenous government with which to partner and empower. Or, as Menkhaus puts it, the “Somalia case suggests that state building is exponentially more difficult where the country has been in a state of collapse for an extended period of time.”<sup>18</sup>

And yet, in recent years, as the nascent national Somali Government has become more functional, the United States has supported efforts to strengthen it. Even while USG assistance efforts continue to support stabilization and governance at the district and community level, the United States articulates a policy of “helping Somalia’s government strengthen democratic institutions, improve stability and security, and deliver services for the Somali people.” Despite the high degree of decentralization (encouraged to some degree by foreign donors, but also a function of strong clan domination of various regions), U.S. policy makes clear that the goal is to “recognize the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Somalia within its 1960 borders in accordance with the Somali

provisional constitution.”<sup>19</sup> Thus, even in the still-fragile environment of Somalia, strengthening national state institutions remains an important priority. Specifically,

*since 2013, the Federal Government of Somalia has made progress establishing government institutions, negotiating relationships with regional authorities, and supporting community stabilization. The United States supports the FGS’s state-building agenda for completing federal state formation, completing a review of the provisional constitution and holding a constitutional referendum, preparing for democratic elections, promoting reconciliation, and strengthening responsive and representative governing institutions.*<sup>20</sup>

### **Northern Iraq (1991–2003)**

In northern Iraq, from 1991, when Operation Provide Comfort (OPC) began until after 2003, when the government of Saddam Hussein was overthrown, the United States theoretically recognized Baghdad’s sovereignty over the entire country. Although not explicit, the United States followed a “One-Iraq” policy and respected UN sanctions on all of Iraq, even though Saddam Hussein had withdrawn Iraqi military forces from parts of the North. While the Kurds created a Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) in 1992, the United States did not recognize its authority. At the same time, however, the United States interacted with Kurdish authorities in their capacity as political party leaders independently of Baghdad. The United States also provided humanitarian assistance to populations in the safe-haven in northern Iraq—alongside other governments and international organizations—and maintained a no-fly zone to prevent Saddam from attacking parts of the North, although legally the territory remained part of Saddam Hussein’s

Iraq. The net effect was to semi-legitimize and empower the Kurdistan Region and Kurdish aims for independence, while also effectively encouraging internal Kurdish power struggles (from 1994–98 the Kurds engaged in a civil war). After the U.S. intervention in 2003, the Kurdistan Region of Iraq emerged as a relatively stable, comparatively prosperous region that pursued a high degree of autonomy and eventually—and unsuccessfully—attempted to realize full independence.<sup>21</sup>

It may be tempting to draw parallels between the case of northern Iraq and the situation in northeastern Syria, and indeed there are some similarities. But that the historical trajectories of dominant Kurdish groups, the nature of the Syrian and (post-2003) Iraqi states, and Kurdish-state relations is fundamentally different. Iraqi Kurds had an “Autonomous Region” created and legally recognized by the Iraqi government since 1970; this is not the case in Syria, but could theoretically change as a result of an eventual political resolution of the Syria conflict and a future Syrian constitution.<sup>22</sup>

### **Afghanistan**

After 2001, the United States had two conflicting lines of effort in Afghanistan: counterinsurgency operations aimed at killing or capturing terrorists; and stabilization and democracy promotion. The first required working with local chieftains to stabilize outlying areas and push out Taliban—and thus unintentionally challenging central government authority—while the second focused on legitimizing and strengthening the central government.<sup>23</sup>

In Afghanistan, the central government has historically been weak and unable to control tribal leaders and operate in large parts of its own territory. Consequently, the United States has sought to work with regional authorities, in some cases even with regional authorities that maintain an adversarial relationship with the Kabul government. Some have argued that we should ultimately go further—that

decentralization is the only way to keep Afghanistan together. Robert Blackwill, for example, argued in a 2011 article in *Foreign Affairs*, that “reluctantly accepting a de facto partition of Afghanistan is hardly a utopian outcome in Afghanistan. But it is better than all the alternatives.”<sup>24</sup> But the United States nonetheless works from the premise that the Kabul government is its principal partner, and asserting central government control over the entire country is desirable.<sup>25</sup>

### “Indefinite Stabilization”

Taken to an extreme (certainly beyond any current military definition of “stabilization”) almost any area could in theory be stabilized indefinitely—it just requires a sufficient financial and military investment. There are a few extreme examples of this “indefinite stabilization”—cases in which an outside party controls territory where it is not sovereign, in anticipation of a political resolution that never materializes. Northern Cyprus, for example, will supposedly be unified one day with the rest of the island through an as-yet-unsuccessful political process. In the meantime, Turkey serves as the ultimate guarantor for the nominally independent Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus until such time as a unification deal is struck with the Republic of Cyprus.

Another example is the Golan Heights. The Government of Syria considers the Golan Heights to be Israeli-occupied territory, as does much of the rest of the world. Israel applies Israeli law there but has not formally annexed it. At various times, the status of the Golan Heights has been the subject of Syrian–Israeli negotiations that, in principle, could have led to the return of the Golan Heights to Syrian control.

In the case of Northern Cyprus, a political process continues, but has thus far been unsuccessful. In the case of the Golan Heights, the last political negotiations were many years ago, and Iranian expansionism in Syria and the Syrian civil war have hardened Israeli views of the Golan and made

the prospect of a resumed political process seem remote. What the two territories have in common is that they are both quite stable, but that stability has come at a price: an unqualified military commitment from Turkey and Israel, and the complete integration of those territories into their respective economies. Those commitments are absolute, and they are open-ended.<sup>26</sup>

These are certainly imperfect analogies, largely because the strategic value of those territories is greater for Turkey and Israel than any part of Syria will ever be for the United States. But there is a lesson—maintaining such “indefinite stabilization” requires open-ended security control and economic support of some party. Absent such a commitment, or a viable political process, one should expect a renewed effort by the sovereign state to resume control.

### What is Required?

Some have suggested that such ambiguous scenarios as Syria, Somalia, or Afghanistan, require a willingness to look at other models of governance. Stephen Krasner of Stanford University, for example, looked at the situation of failed and fragile states and argued that something short of full Westphalian sovereignty might be the best we can hope for. He essentially argues that the world is such a mess that “to reduce international threats and improve the prospects for individuals in such polities, alternative institutional arrangements supported by external actors, such as de facto trusteeships and shared sovereignty, should be added to the list of policy options.”<sup>27</sup> While these views have been criticized in some quarters as a sort of neo-colonialism, Krasner at least recognizes that the chaos of weak, failed, and conflict-torn states and their potential to export harm to others calls for a high measure of realism when evaluating acceptable end states.<sup>28</sup>

We may find in the Syrian model many of the challenges of the future, including this one: a region of importance for the United States and our partners

where there is simply no central state able or willing to maintain control and assume responsibility, or—as in the case of Syria—kept purposely outside the control of the central government. Post–conflict stabilization is difficult enough, and even *with* a willing and motivated state partner there are strong odds of a return to de-stabilizing political violence.<sup>29</sup> To undertake stabilization in regions outside the control of a central state that considers it part of its sovereign right, adds a considerable layer of challenge and complexity and suggests a financial and security commitment that goes beyond what the USG might wish to invest.

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Without a viable political process that leads in a realistic timeframe toward a resumption of central state control, what are the prospects for maintaining stability? If security could be guaranteed, could local authorities function as the government indefinitely without connection to the capital? What about economic livelihood—does a stabilized-but-isolated area become abjectly dependent on foreign aid? Under what conditions could the foreign security guarantor depart? Does it effectively become impossible to depart in the absence of a stable arrangement with the central state, i.e. a final and broadly

accepted political settlement? Do these efforts create areas permanently in insurrection against the central state, and is such a scenario sustainable? What steps could be taken to maximize the prospects for stability? Is there a minimal level of instability that we are willing to accept—if so what is it?

These are complicated questions, but such scenarios seem to have a minimum of three requirements.

### ***Credible Security Guarantees via an Enduring Military Footprint***

Experience suggests that the support of local populations for ad hoc and imperfect governance structures depends in large measure on their perception of the solidity of external support. In other words, if the local populace believes we are going to leave, they will find some other party that can ensure their security, and that party may not be friendly to the United States. The Syria experience has shown us that the U.S. military presence need not be large to protect the area from the predations of a government that seeks to assert control over it. But the presence needs to be sufficient to deter the government and its allies, possibly bolstered by a political agreement such as a ceasefire or de-confliction arrangement. Absent credible security guarantees from the United States or some other external party, another possibility is an international peacekeeping force. But finding the necessary degree of international consensus and resources (and, presumably, UN involvement) to manage such an operation in a politically fraught environment like Syria would be exceptionally challenging.

### ***Economic Development Assistance and Humanitarian Aid***

Until some fragmentary territory is sufficiently re-integrated into a viable economy, it will remain highly dependent on foreign aid. Long-term aid may be politically unpopular in the United States and elsewhere, and cause economic distortions that may serve

to further cement that dependency. But absent an international willingness to provide aid (and sometimes even with it), residents will not choose to starve, and will resort to smuggling, criminality, or surreptitious trade with parties we may find objectionable. Providing aid in areas outside of government control brings its own challenges, including finding reliable delivery mechanisms. The UN, for example, works with member-state governments, so aid deliveries to opposition-controlled areas in Syria have never been reliable. The United States and other external parties have developed their own delivery channels.

***A High Tolerance for Working with Non-State Actors, Including Armed Rebel Groups, to Provide Basic Governmental Services, Including Justice***

Krasner and Thomas Risse, a professor of international politics at the Freie Universität Berlin, have looked at governance in failed states and areas of limited statehood, and noted in a 2014 study that,

*in many polities there are areas of limited statehood in which central authorities are unable to effectively enforce decisions. Yet areas of limited statehood are not ungoverned spaces where nothing gets accomplished and Hobbesian anarchy reigns. Rather . . . a variety of other actors—state and non-state—have stepped or stumbled into those these spaces.<sup>30</sup>*

Ken Menkhaus, whose extensive work on Somalia has focused in particular on governance in areas of limited state functions, calls this phenomenon “governance without government.” In a study from 2007, he explains that,

*communities that have been cut off from an effective state authority—whether out of governmental indifference to marginal frontier territories, or because of*

*protracted warfare, or because of vested local and external interests in perpetuating conditions of state failure—consistently seek to devise arrangements to provide for themselves the core functions that the missing state is supposed to assume, especially basic security.<sup>31</sup>*

So, while non-state actors tend to start off as insurgents, that is, politically motivated armed rebels, we need to deal with these groups not only as militias, but also as bodies responsible for governance and administration, often with their own political project. Many of the non-state elements in conflict environments do not fully share our values or long-term vision, and yet are the only parties capable of governing. Even then, many of them are operating in highly chaotic settings with a high degree of internal fragmentation. This suggests that not only do we need to be prepared to deal with non-state actors as governing bodies, but we need to do so with a high tolerance for ambiguous, sub-optimal situations. Further, we need to contemplate the longer-term consequences, including the legal and political status of non-state partner forces, their ultimate relationships with central state governments, and the United States’ practical, moral, and political obligations.

**Conclusion**

Trying to draw lessons, even initial ones, from the U.S. experience in Syria is daunting, but the bottom line is that any conflict setting—and any effort to design a program of stabilization—brings a unique set of peculiarities that may not resemble conflicts in which we have been involved in the past. The Syria experience, where there is no central government with which the United States and others in the international community can partner and empower, is an excellent example, and suggests a need for careful analysis of the specific

circumstances of settings in which the United States may find itself operating in order to develop stabilization doctrine and tools that are suited not only to the last conflict, but to the next one. **PRISM**

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Rober C. Orr, ed, “Winning the Peace, An American Strategy for Post-Conflict Reconstruction,” *Significant Issues Series*, 27 no. 7 (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2004).

<sup>2</sup> Samuel R. Berger, Brent Snowcroft, and William Nash, “In the Wake of War: Improving U.S. Post-Conflict Capabilities,” *Independent Task Force Report* no. 55 (New York: Council on Foreign Relations, 2005).

<sup>3</sup> U.S. Department of Army, Field Manual 3-07: Stability Operations, Washington, D.C., October 6, 2008, available at <<https://usacac.army.mil/cac2/repository/FM307/FM3-07.pdf>>. Department of Defense Instruction 3000.05, September 16, 2009, available at <<http://www.esd.whs.mil/Portals/54/Documents/DD/issuances/dodi/300005p.pdf>>. Joint Publication 3-07 “Stability,” August 3, 2016, available at <[http://pksoi.armywarcollege.edu/default/assets/File/jp3\\_07.pdf](http://pksoi.armywarcollege.edu/default/assets/File/jp3_07.pdf)>.

<sup>4</sup> A very good example was produced by National Defense University. See: Richard D. Hooker, Jr., and Joseph J. Collins, eds., *Lessons Encountered: Learning from the Long War*, (Washington DC: National Defense University Press, September 2015).

<sup>5</sup> “Stabilization in Syria: Lessons from Afghanistan and Iraq,” commentary by Hijab Shah and Melissa Dalton on Center for Strategic and International Security Studies website, June 9, 2017 available at <<https://www.csis.org/analysis/stabilization-syria-lessons-afghanistan-and-iraq>>.

<sup>6</sup> President George W. Bush “Address to the Nation,” October 7, 2001, available at <<https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2001/10/20011007-8.html>>.

<sup>7</sup> President George W. Bush, *National Security Strategy of the United States of America* (2002), the White House available at <<https://www.state.gov/documents/organization/63562.pdf>>.

<sup>8</sup> It would eventually grow much higher. See: Kenneth Katzman and Clayton Thomas, “Afghanistan: Post-Taliban Governance, Security, and U.S. Policy,” (Washington DC: Congressional Research Service, July 11, 2014), available at <<https://fas.org/sgp/crs/row/RL30588.pdf>>.

<sup>9</sup> President Donald Trump, *National Security Strategy of the United States of America*, The White House, December 2017, available at <<https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/>

NSS-Final-12-18-2017-0905.pdf>.

<sup>10</sup> USAID, “Where We Work: Afghanistan and Pakistan,” USAID.gov, available at <<https://www.usaid.gov/where-we-work/afghanistan-and-pakistan>>.

<sup>11</sup> President George W. Bush, “Remarks by the President in Address to the Nation,” The White House, March 17, 2003, available at <<https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2003/03/20030317-7.html>>.

<sup>12</sup> James Dobbins, John G. McGinn, Keith Crane, et all, *America’s Role in Nation-Building: From Germany to Iraq*, (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2003), available at <[https://www.rand.org/pubs/monograph\\_reports/MR1753.html](https://www.rand.org/pubs/monograph_reports/MR1753.html)>.

<sup>13</sup> President Donald Trump, *National Security Strategy of the United States of America* (2017).

<sup>14</sup> Some have argued that partition would not be the worst thing in fragile states that are on the verge of splitting up anyway. Author and political commentator Peter Galbraith has repeatedly made these arguments with respect to Iraq, such as in his 2006 article on “Divide Iraq,” *Newrepublic.com*, November 27, 2006, available at <<https://newrepublic.com/article/63017/divide-iraq>>. Robert Blackwill and others have argued that a de facto ethnically based partition is the least bad option for Afghanistan. But in the case of Syria, like Iraq and Afghanistan, U.S. policy has been—and remains—a commitment to these countries’ unity and territorial integrity. Even U.S. support for de-escalation areas in Syria, or partnership with the Syrian Democratic Forces to fight ISIL in the northeast, or support for anti-Assad rebels, was never meant to suggest a policy of partition. A commitment to the territorial integrity of Syria (like Iraq and Afghanistan) remains a common thread through successive U.S. Administrations, including the current one. USAID, “Where We Work: Iraq,” USAID.gov, available at <<https://www.usaid.gov/iraq/governance>>.

<sup>15</sup> Confirmed by the Department of Defense Spokesman on September 23, 2014. See Department of Defense, “DOD Press Briefing on Operations in Syria by Lt. General Mayville in the Pentagon Briefing Room,” Spetmeber 23, 2014, available at <<https://www.defense.gov/News/Transcripts/Transcript-View/Article/606931/department-of-defense-press-briefing-on-operations-in-syria-by-lt-gen-mayville/>>.

<sup>16</sup> Joseph L. Votel, USA, and Eero R. Keravouiri “The By-With-Through Operational Approach,” *Joint Forces Quarterly* 89 (Washington D.C., National Defense University Press, April 2018), available at <<http://ndupress.ndu.edu/Media/News/News-Article-View/Article/1491891/the-by-with-through-operational-approach/>>. His interview in the same edition of *Joint Forces Quarterly* is available to read here <<http://ndupress.ndu>

edu/Media/News/News-Article-View/Article/1491689/an-interview-with-joseph-l-votel/>.

<sup>17</sup> Zachariah Mampilly, a scholar at Vassar College, in a fascinating study of governance in rebel-held areas, cautions against use of the term “warlord,” which suggests bandits motivated exclusively by extraction of money. He argues that the reality is often more complex, with rebels demonstrating a willingness and capacity to provide governance in the absence of formal government control. Zachariah Mampilly, “Rebel Rulers, Insurgent Governance and Civilian Life During War,” (Cornell University Press, 2011).

<sup>18</sup> Ken Menkhaus, “Stabilization in Practice, the Somali Case,” in *Stabilization Operations, Security and Development: States of Fragility*, Robert Muggah, ed., (Routledge, 2014).

<sup>19</sup> Markus Virgil Hoehne, a German scholar at Leipzig University, makes this point, and also observes that “territoriality” became a simple survival mechanism after the Somali state collapsed in 1990. Markus Virgil Hoehne, “The Rupture of Territoriality and the Diminishing Relevance of Cross-cutting Ties in Somalia after 1990,” *Development and Change*, Vol 47 no.6, (The Hague: International Institute of Social Studies, November 2016), 1379–1411.

<sup>20</sup> U.S. Department of State, “U.S. Relations with Somalia,” Bureau of African Affairs Fact Sheet, April 12, 2017, available at <<https://www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/2863.htm>>.

<sup>21</sup> Denise Natali, *The Kurdish Quasi-State, Development and Dependency in Post-Gulf War Iraq* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 2010).

<sup>22</sup> It is also worth remembering that there was a four year civil war *within* northern Iraq that resulted from changes in the local balance of power between the principal Kurdish political leaders there, a phenomenon with no parallel in modern Syria.

<sup>23</sup> Arguably, this contradiction also existed in post-Saddam Iraq, where the U.S. engaged in democracy promotion and state-building, but also worked with local militias, tribes and the Peshmerga to stabilize outlying areas, and undertake counter terrorism operations.

<sup>24</sup> Robert D. Blackwill, “Plan B in Afghanistan: Why a deFacto Partition is the Least Bad Option,” *Foreign Affairs* (January/February 2011), available at <<https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/afghanistan/2010-12-13/plan-b-afghanistan>>.

<sup>25</sup> USAID, “Where We Work: Afghanistan and Pakistan,” USAID.gov, available at <<https://www.usaid.gov/where-we-work/afghanistan-and-pakistan>>.

<sup>26</sup> In addition, there are UN peacekeeping or monitoring forces in both Cyprus and the Golan.

<sup>27</sup> Stephen D. Krasner, “Sharing Sovereignty,

New Institutions for Collapsed and Failing States,” *International Security*, 29, no. 2 (Fall 2004).

<sup>28</sup> For example, Tod Moore, “Violations of Sovereignty and Regime Engineering: A Critique of the State Theory of Stephen Krasner,” *Australian Journal of Political Science*, 44, no. 3 (September 2009).

<sup>29</sup> Paul Collier of Oxford University has written extensively about this and offered statistical evidence, including in his book *War, Guns, and Votes—Democracy in Dangerous Place*, (New York: Harper Collins, 2009).

<sup>30</sup> Stephen D. Krasner and Thomas Risse, “External Actors, State-Building, and Service Provision,” *Governance* 27, 545–67.

<sup>31</sup> Ken Menkhaus, “Governance without Government in Somalia: Spoilers, State Building, and the Politics of Coping,” *International Security* 31, no. 3, (Winter 2006–07), 74–106; We tend to think of non-state actors as either insurgents to be defeated or rebels whose cause we champion, though that dichotomy often belies the complex realities. The complexities of rebel governance is dealt with at length in Zachariah Mampilly’s “Rebel Rulers,” referenced earlier

*Rather than equating insurgent governance systems with mere criminality or, more generously, with a form of embryonic state building . . . it is better to focus on examining the limits and possibilities of establishing political order outside the control of the state.*

Nonetheless, working indefinitely with non-state actors has obvious drawbacks, including empowering separatist impulses and sowing the seeds of long-term civil war, and should therefore ideally occur in coordination with a central state, or only until a competent central state is recognized. At that point, support should be contingent on the eventual recognition of state authority—perhaps with decentralized governance—but one that emphasizes territorial integrity and state sovereignty above non-state demands.

## Photos

Page 48. <https://www.flickr.com/photos/christiaantrieberrt/795551210/in/photolist-d81hd3-hHUUVn-hHTXzB-fatNA7-fk4mmb-fjPaNt-fk4nUL-fk4zjQ-fk4w7Y-fk4vD7-rjjjt6-fk4rvq-fk4wSo-fjPdRp-fjPm6H-pPYm2H-fk4pvu-AKQ15P-DNX-2At-AJCGN9-DNX2mk-t411ip-xDKhtL-xF6mL8-xCa2E7-xnRYk3-xDD42j-xC9XqW-wHASdz-wHAHBr-xnRWxL-xnYrd8-xF5R6X-xnXTB2-xDCSH3-xF6kD8-xC9sAb-xnY4jZ-xF6gT2-xEt2cp-xnXYwc-xDCdDc-xnRJ9Y-xnXWQ6-xEtsmH-wHAAt9D-xEtvnc-xDD2jS-xDD88f-xF69Xt/>. Licensed under Creative Commons Attribution 2.0 Generic License. Photo unaltered.