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After Liberation

Assessing Stabilization Efforts in Areas
of Iraq Cleared of the Islamic State

By Hardin Lang and Muath Al Wari   July 2016

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Introduction and summary

Two years on, the U.S.-led campaign against the Islamic State, or IS,* has achieved some important gains. This is particularly true in Iraq, where the liberation of Fallujah last month has focused attention on Mosul—the capital of the so-called caliphate.[1] But military victory is only half the battle. As the Islamic State is pushed out of Iraqi cities and towns, the communities it ruled must be integrated back into Iraq. Nature abhors a vacuum; the U.S.-led Global Coalition to Counter ISIL should do more to support the Iraqi government in filling that vacuum. For its part, the Iraqi government itself must display a greater commitment to inclusive governance that reinforces its own legitimacy. Failure to do so would risk squandering hard-won gains by setting the stage for the Islamic State—or its successor—to return. It also could undercut U.S. strategic goals in the Middle East more broadly.

The key will be to close the gaps in resources and priority afforded to the different elements of the global coalition's campaign. That campaign is organized along five lines of effort: military efforts, counter-finance, stopping the flow of foreign fighters, stabilization, and strategic messaging.[2] The military line, otherwise known as Operation Inherent Resolve, has cut the territory controlled by the Islamic State almost in half.[3] Other key coalition lines have yielded less robust results. In particular, efforts to stabilize territory in the wake of combat operations have not kept pace with progress on the battlefield—even as that progress makes stabilization all the more urgent.

Early on, former Special Presidential Envoy for the Global Coalition to Counter-ISIL John Allen warned that efforts to stabilize territory in the wake of combat would be essential to the campaign's success, saying that "Iraq's future as a unified nation" depends upon how well liberated Sunni Arab communities are treated.[4]

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* The Center for American Progress refers to this Islamic militant organization as the Islamic State, or IS. It is also known as the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant, or ISIL; the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria, or ISIS; and Daesh, its Arabic language acronym. Any variations in the name of the group that appear in this report are due to different source standards; for example, the U.S. government and its allies refer to the group as ISIL.

His successor, Brett McGurk, recently told Congress that "stabilizing areas after ISIL can be even more important than clearing areas from ISIL."[5] These admonitions are grounded in hard lessons that the United States and its allies have learned in more than 10 years of fighting in Iraq and Afghanistan. This experience has demonstrated the fragility of battlefield gains in the face of political failures and the absence of legitimate governance. Although these failures are ultimately the responsibility of Iraq's leaders, members of the coalition also have a significant stake and role to play in the ultimate outcome.

To date, the United States alone has spent more than $7.5 billion on military operations against the Islamic State.[6] If this investment is to pay lasting dividends, it must be accompanied by an effort to help establish conditions for stability in liberated areas—an effort that is only now beginning to receive significant resources. It is important to understand that stabilization is not a development or reconstruction program with the attendant enormous cost. Instead, it is a short-term intervention designed to solidify military gains and prepare for longer-term recovery through relatively inexpensive projects. Stabilization can also buy time and build local support for a wider process of national reconciliation, as well as serve as a firewall against the Islamic State as the group is forced to revert to guerrilla warfare by its loss of terrain.

A failure to address this shortcoming would undercut prospects for long-term success in Iraq. But it could also have wider implications for U.S. strategic goals in the region. A unified Iraq remains a major American policy goal in the Middle East. The 2003 Iraq War ended the U.S. strategy of dual containment of Iran and Iraq and shifted the regional balance of power toward Iran. For more than 13 years, the United States has worked to shore up Iraqi stability and reintegrate it into the broader region. But the Islamic State's rise and capture of key parts of north and western Iraq has marked a dramatic setback in that effort. The failure of the U.S.-led coalition to mobilize the Gulf states and other regional partners in an attempt to hold Iraq together bodes ill for a long-term regional strategy based on strategic burden sharing.

This report—part of an ongoing series on the Global Coalition to Counter ISIL—examines stabilization efforts in Iraq. It uses lessons learned by the United States and the United Kingdom to provide a framework for understanding stabilization and explores how the coalition and its partners have organized themselves to affect it. It also uses extensive interviews with U.S., U.K., German, Iraqi, Gulf, and U.N. Development Programme—or UNDP—officials conducted by the authors

over the period from April to July 2016. The report goes on to examines trends in key stabilization indicators, including data on the return of internally displaced people and donor efforts to meet short-term community needs. The report then reviews post-liberation experiences in Tikrit, Ramadi, and Sinjar and presents key analytical findings. It concludes by offering the following set of recommendations:

• Strengthen leadership for stabilization and integrate it into other coalition lines of effort.
• Strengthen U.S. bilateral support for stabilization.
• Undertake U.S. diplomatic regional outreach to reduce tensions between Baghdad and the Gulf states and build support for stabilization.
• Develop a "day after" plan to govern Mosul before military liberation.
• Undertake a strategic review of the drivers of displacement and instability.
• Accelerate the disbursement of donor pledges and strengthen the capacity to implement on the ground.

There have also been military efforts—and some progress—against the Islamic State in Syria. However, that country's ongoing civil war has so far prevented the emergence of a full stabilization effort. While there have been some limited attempts to stabilize Syrian communities liberated from the Islamic State, they have taken place outside the framework of the counter-ISIL coalition and are therefore outside the scope of this report.[7]

Stabilization in Iraq— what's at stake?

In Iraq, the military campaign against the Islamic State has pushed the organization out of half of the towns and villages it controlled two years ago.[8] American military capability did not dictate this pace; instead, the pace depended on the progress that the coalition's Iraqi partners could sustain on the ground. The experience of the U.S. military in Iraq and elsewhere underscores the importance of stabilizing communities in the wake of combat operations to lock in progress. This in turn can buy time to help parties reconcile and for politics and governance to address the deep-seated grievances that drive conflict. This section will explore what is involved in stabilization. It will also review Iraq's recent history and the dangers inherent in ignoring such grievances.

Stabilization refers to a range of short-term and small-scale interventions designed to help a country or community emerging from conflict lessen the prospects of a return to violence. Most Western militaries recognize that to secure battlefield gains, they need to address immediate drivers of instability in the wake of combat operations. The U.S. Army field manual on stability operations defines stability as "a set of conditions the local populace regards as legitimate, acceptable, and predictable."[9] Therefore, stability operations focus on the provision of public security, basic services, short-term employment, and the rule of law. These tasks are carried out by civilian officers to demonstrate progress to local populations, as well as to win their support. The goal is to buy time in which to address long-term drivers of conflict.

A key objective of stabilization is to imbue national government and local authorities with greater legitimacy in the eyes of the governed. As such, stabilization is a programmatic exercise with a political objective. U.K. doctrine is more explicit on this score. It defines stabilization as an approach "used in situations of violent conflict which is designed to protect and promote legitimate authority."[10] This approach uses local service delivery and other stabilization activities to empower local leaders. Ideally, these activities would also link back to the national authorities or reconciliation process so as to reinforce the legitimacy of the latter. The overarching objective of stabilization is to help achieve a lasting political settlement in a fragile or failing state.

Challenges of the recent past

Efforts to stabilize areas in Iraq that have been liberated from the Islamic State are complicated by the country's recent history, its ongoing political crisis, and trends in the region. Former Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki failed to lead a transition from stabilization to national reconciliation in the years following the surge by U.S. forces in which the Sons of Iraq—a 100,000-strong Sunni tribal fighting force—helped defeat Al Qaeda.[11] Al-Maliki disbanded the Sons of Iraq and reneged on the promise to provide fighters with permanent jobs. He grew increasingly authoritarian and sectarian in his rule, demoralizing the Iraqi military and setting the stage for the rise of the Islamic State.[12]

Iraq's regional position fared no better. Gulf states offered little support to a government that they believed to be too close to Iran and responsible for Sunni Arab marginalization.[13] Despite the emergence of a common enemy in the Islamic State, relations between the Gulf Cooperation Council, or GCC, and Iraq remain strained. The government in Baghdad has shown no interest in Gulf support for the coalition's military campaign to roll back IS.[14] For their part, the Gulf states have little appetite to help the government fund stabilization in the predominantly Sunni Arab areas that so far have been liberated from IS. According to one senior official from a Gulf country, whatever aid his country has pledged for stabilization in Iraq is primarily due to American lobbying rather than faith in the Iraqi government's ability to deliver.[15]

The politics of stabilization

A series of factors have stymied the efforts of current Iraqi Prime Minister Haidar al-Abadi to make progress on stabilization. These factors include opposition from his own party, al-Maliki's ongoing efforts to undermine him, and the wider intra-Shia political crisis.[16] Making matters worse, the rise of IS has thrown Iraq's already weak Sunni Arab political class into disarray. This has left al-Abadi without a capable partner on the other side of the sectarian divide. Meanwhile, declining oil prices and the cost of fighting have thrown the Iraqi government into financial crisis.[17] In short, the Iraqi government finds itself politically and financially ill-equipped to stabilize the predominantly Sunni Arab communities liberated from the Islamic State.

A central challenge facing both Iraq and the Global Coalition to Counter ISIL is how to close the gap between progress on the battlefield and stalled efforts to stabilize liberated areas after combat. Stabilization efforts can help local communities begin to recover in the wake of military operations and prevent a slide back into anarchy that would only benefit the Islamic State. It can also buy time to lay the foundation for longer-term national reconciliation. As the military noose tightens around the caliphate's Iraqi capital in Mosul, the Islamic State will increasingly revert to insurgent tactics. Effective stabilization in liberated communities will be a central line of defense against the Islamic State's growing reliance on asymmetric warfare. It could also help persuade the Gulf states and other donors that the government in Baghdad cares about the future of Sunni Arab communities. This, in turn, could facilitate greater regional cooperation in ensuring that history does not repeat itself after the defeat of the Islamic State.

Institutional arrangements to support stabilization in Iraq

The international institutional architecture set up to support stabilization in Iraq does not benefit from clear leadership or a clear chain of command. Nor does it appear to be a central priority for key coalition members. While stabilization is an explicit line of effort for the counter-ISIL coalition, it is not one of the nine bilateral lines of effort that President Barack Obama's administration set out in its strategy to fight the Islamic State.[18] This omission appears to be deliberate. From the outset, the administration has been understandably reluctant to get involved in shouldering post-conflict responsibilities in Iraq. There is little domestic support in the United States to engage in another costly and time-consuming effort to rebuild Iraq after the failures of the previous decade.[19] This view tends to conflate short-term stabilization with more expensive and longer-term reconstruction.

There are two international bodies—of which more than 20 nations are a part—tasked explicitly with supporting stabilization in areas that have been liberated from the Islamic State. The first is the Coalition Working Group on Stabilization within the Global Coalition to Counter ISIL. According to a coalition official, this working group was set up to "provide coordinated international support for the government of Iraq."[20] It is co-chaired by the United Arab Emirates and Germany. In practice, the CWGS has served as a forum to share information and to raise money from coalition members for the second international body—the United Nations' Funding Facility for Immediate Stabilization, or FFIS. The U.N. Development Programme established the facility in June 2015 "to address immediate needs of the populations following military clearing operations and liberation."[21]

No formal relationship exists between the CWGS and the FFIS. A UNDP representative attends coalition meetings, and coalition members are represented on the FFIS steering committee.[22] But the CWGS exerts no direct authority over the FFIS. Nor does it provide the facility with formal strategic guidance. By default, leadership for stabilization has fallen to the U.N. Resident Coordinator and Humanitarian Coordinator for Iraq, Lise Grande, who attends CWGS meet-

ings and is in close contact with coalition member states.[23] She is highly regarded by coalition members and donors, as is the work of the FFIS, according to U.S., British, and German coalition officials.[24] But her office exists outside the coalition chain of command, and she has limited formal access to the planning and execution of other coalition lines of effort—including military operations.

The actual implementation of stabilization is closely coordinated with the Iraqi government. The United Nations conducts joint needs assessments of liberated areas with the prime minister's office and provincial governors. Their findings are corroborated by additional site visits and workshops with local stakeholders. A final list of needs is then presented to provincial officials for comment and endorsement. While the UNDP facilitates the assessments, some element of skill-transfer is at play since Iraqi authorities "collect all data, assess damage, and collate in a methodical manner to produce reports."[25]

In addition to the FFIS, the UNDP established a Funding Facility for Expanded Stabilization, or FFES, in April 2016. The FFES covers stabilization projects over a longer period than FFIS—up to three years—and its approach is closer to traditional reconstruction. Its mandate is to "help bridge the period between immediate stabilization and reconstruction."[26] Like the FFIS, the FFES relies on voluntary contributions. It has requested $550 million for stabilization activity between now and December 2018.[27]

In response to lackluster funding, a pledging conference for stabilization in Iraq was held in Washington, D.C., on July 20. According to the U.S. Department of State, the conference secured pledges from international donors that totaled $2.1 billion. That outcome was an important win for the Obama administration. But not all of the money is destined for stabilization: Of the $2.1 billion, only $125 million is slated for the FFIS—roughly 60 percent of the total preexisting pledges to the facility. Another $350 million was pledged for "critical stabilization programming," but it is unclear how and by whom that money will be spent. Almost $600 million in pledges is earmarked for the humanitarian response. A mere $50 million was pledged for the FFES—the funding facility with longer-term and more costly responsibilities.[28]

In addition, translating pledges into funding in hand has been a significant challenge for the FFIS. Of the $200 million pledged prior to the July conference, only 40 percent had been disbursed by donors. As one senior UNDP official observed, "It is difficult to get from pledges to signatures. Countries don't give Iraq the

same level of interest as other conflicts."[29] Additionally, the absence of significant stabilization funding from the Gulf Cooperation Council is particularly striking. Although the FFIS was designed to provide the political neutrality, transparency, and accountability that donors sought, most Gulf states remain reluctant to donate to the funding facility.[30]

Senior officials from coalition member countries attribute the dearth of significant GCC funding to three factors: 1) suspicion over Iranian influence in Iraq; 2) Prime Minister al-Abadi's inability to deliver on reconciliation; and 3) concerns over corruption inside the Iraqi government.[31] The UNDP was reportedly tasked with stabilization in part to allay some of these concerns.[32]

The relatively weak institutional arrangements and lack of financial support for stabilization efforts have been largely a function of the recent experience of the region and the international community in Iraq. If that experience continues to guide the post-conflict response, however, the lack of leadership and resources may well cripple efforts to stabilize liberated communities, which, in turn, could endanger battlefield gains and set the stage for a further deterioration of relations between Baghdad and its Gulf neighbors.

Progress to date

Since internally displaced people, or IDP, returns are considered the primary benchmark for stabilization success, trends in the return of populations deserve scrutiny. The emerging picture is one of return rates that are not commensurate with military success. An important factor in this picture is the nature of stabilization spending in liberated territory. The below section looks at trends in both returns and stabilization spending.

Trends in population displacement and return

The coalition does not have formal benchmarks for tracking the progress of stabilization efforts. U.S., British, and German officials, however, all point to the return of displaced people to liberated areas as the central indicator.[33] The high rate of return in Tikrit is held up as proof that the city has stabilized. If the return of local displaced people is to serve as a metric of success, figures for a given town or district such as Tikrit should be framed in the wider context of national and regional displacement trends linked to the Islamic State crisis.

The International Organization for Migration, or IOM—a multilateral organization concerned with humane migration—has tracked rates of displacement in Iraq since the beginning of the crisis. IOM data indicate that aggregate forced displacement triggered by crisis-related violence increased from less than 450,000 people in April 2014 to more than 3.2 million people in July 2016.[34] In short, the total number of civilians displaced by the violence has grown steadily over the course of the crisis. The total number of displaced civilians now constitutes a little less than 10 percent of Iraq's population.[35] While the total displaced number continues to rise, hundreds of thousands of Iraqis have also gone home. By the end of June 2016, IOM data indicated that more than 750,000 individuals had returned to their location of origin.[36] The Salah al-Din governorate has experienced the highest percentage of registered returns—more than 268,000 individuals.[37] Tikrit district alone hosts one-quarter of the total returnee population.[38]

While the Islamic State has lost almost half of the territory it gained in Iraq, the IOM's data suggest that only one-fifth of those who fled their homes or were displaced have subsequently returned.[39] Of the eight governorates where the IS crisis has displaced populations, only Irbil has seen more than half of its displaced population return. Salah al-Din and Diyala have experienced return rates between 38 percent and 47 percent, respectively—despite the fact that Iraqi security forces, with coalition assistance, have largely cleared the Islamic State from these governorates. In Anbar, where the Islamic State has been cleared from most towns and villages, only 5 percent of the displaced population has returned home.[40]

Trends in stabilization spending

The FFIS is the central mechanism for implementing short-term stabilization activities in liberated areas. According to its last activity report, $61.2 million out of $81.7 million received by the FFIS has been spent on or committed to quick-impact projects in four governorates.[41] More than half of this funding has been committed to programming in Anbar governorate.[42] The vast majority of these projects are designed to restore basic services such as the power and water supplies. Most of the projects have not yet been given completion dates, primarily because of extensive contamination from unexploded ordnance and improvised explosive devices, or IEDs.[43]

Only 24 percent of FFIS money has been committed to locations in Salah al-Din—the governorate that has received 40 percent of the total returnee population.[44] The relatively low stabilization spend rate per returnee may be attributable to limited damage to local infrastructure compared with other liberated areas. A little less than half of the stabilization spending in Salah al-Din has been earmarked for the city of Tikrit, which hosts more than half of the governorate's returnees.[45] So while Salah al-Din's share of the stabilization funding is not proportional to its share of returnees, that funding does appear to be geographically distributed inside the governorate in proportion to the number of returnees that a given city or village is hosting.

The governorates of Ninevah and Diyala offer contrasting patterns of stabilization spending. Both have received a similar number of returnees—130,000 and 139,000, respectively—but Diyala has received less than one-quarter of Ninevah's total funding. Almost all of the $10 million earmarked for Ninevah to date has been directed to Rabia and Sinuni in the northwest corner of the governorate.[46]

Meanwhile, extensive needs assessments have also been undertaken in the town of Sinjar by provincial officials in concert with the UNDP. This area is home to Yazidis, Kurds, and Sunni Arabs. The Yazidi population suffered dramatically at the hands of the Islamic State, in what the U.S. State Department described as genocide.[47] Damage to physical infrastructure was extensive, and ethnic and sectarian tensions remain high.[48] But Diyala has also experienced ethnic and sectarian tensions. The province has large Sunni and Shia Arab populations and was an early flashpoint for the insurgency and widespread sectarian violence going back to 2005.[49]

Several factors may explain the disparity in spending per returnee. The damage to Diyala's infrastructure may have been less than the corresponding damage in the northwest corner of Ninevah. The impact of the war crimes perpetrated against the Yazidi population may have created a greater need than that in Diyala. But other factors may hold explanations as well. The U.S.-led coalition against IS played a significant role in liberating the northwestern corner of Ninevah. By contrast, it played a relatively small role in supporting Diyala's liberation, where Iran-supported Popular Mobilization Forces units were active.[50] When asked about Diyala, one State Department official observed that the United States is playing a limited role in the stabilization of areas that it did not help liberate.[51] This raises the question of whether stabilization spending is reaching all the areas where it is needed.

Another interesting trend has emerged in the distribution of stabilization spending across the five major categories of stabilization programming according to U.S. doctrine: security, rule of law, basic services, humanitarian assistance, and job creation.[52] The FFIS has allocated the vast majority of its existing funding to improve basic services, including access to water, electricity, and health services. Less than 10 percent of UNDP stabilization funds have been programmed to generate rapid employment. Only 2 percent of these funds have been allocated to facilitate community reconciliation.[53]

The map below shows stabilization spending in key provinces that have been affected by the Islamic State crisis alongside the numbers of IDPs and returnees.

FIGURE 1
IDPs and returnees by governorate and FFIS funds spent or committed

Ninevah

Total number of IDPs	1,283,304
Number of returnees	130,734
Remaining number of IDPs	1,152,570
FFIS funds spent or committed	$10 million
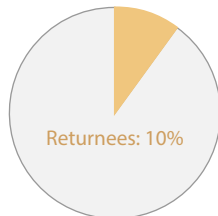
Returnees: 10%

**Salah al-Din**

Total number of IDPs	719,796
Number of returnees	305,850
Remaining number of IDPs	413,946
FFIS funds spent or committed	$20.2 million
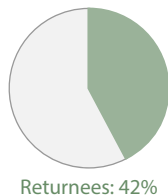
Returnees: 42%

Anbar

Total number of IDPs	1,539,756
Number of returnees	130,374
Remaining number of IDPs	1,409,382
FFIS funds spent or committed	$28.6 million
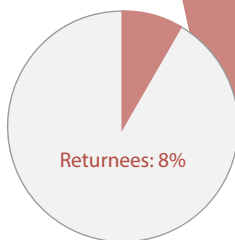
Returnees: 8%

Diyala

Total number of IDPs	268,032
Number of returnees	139,152
Remaining number of IDPs	128,880
FFIS funds spent or committed	$2.4 million

Returnees: 52%

IS occupation
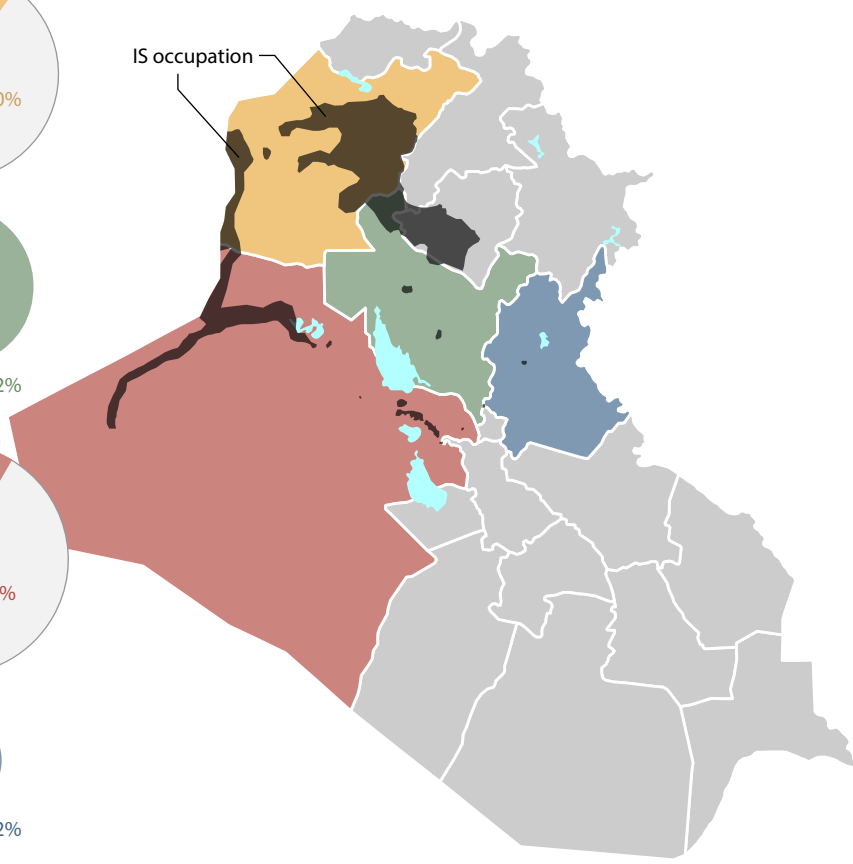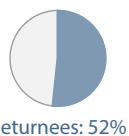
Sources: U.N. Development Programme in Iraq, "Funding Facility for Immediate Stabilization: Quarterly Progress Report - Q2 Year 2016" (2016), pp. 43–54; International Organization for Migration, "Displacement Tracking Matrix - DTM Round 48" (2016), pp. 5–11, available at http://iomiraq.net/file/10927/download.

Case studies from liberated areas

The case studies below provide a snapshot of how stabilization has progressed in specific liberated areas. In Tikrit, for example, the limited scope of the fighting and consequent damage to civilian infrastructure facilitated relatively quick returns and community stabilization. In contrast, Ramadi highlights the implications of major military operations and widespread IED contamination for community stabilization. Sinjar, with its diverse population, underscores the importance of tackling the more intangible aspects of stabilization, including local reconciliation. Each of these case studies has implications for the coming battle to liberate Mosul.

Tikrit

According to *The Wall Street Journal*, Tikrit is "held up by the Iraqi government and its international backers as a success story in the fight against the militant group."[54] That assessment is based on the rate of return of IDPs. According to the coalition, 95 percent of the city's population of nearly 200,000 "have been able to return to their homes since the city was liberated from Daesh."[55] The UNDP also reports that the FFIS has restored the city's main water-pumping facility to its prewar level and rehabilitated seven health facilities and three schools. The FFIS has also provided temporary employment for 800 residents, and cash infusions of $100,000 have allowed 100 shopkeepers to reopen their stores.[56]

A major factor in the timely stabilization of Tikrit was the relatively limited fighting and damage it experienced during liberation. Many Islamic State fighters chose to withdraw rather than fight, and much of the city's infrastructure was left intact.[57] As a result, a large percentage of Tikrit's displaced population was able to return quickly and with relative ease. But other aspects of Tikrit's stabilization were problematic. Popular Mobilization Forces units reportedly carried out extensive abuses against the city's civilian population after the battle, including looting, destruction of civilian residences, and the forced disappearances of civilians.[58]

Ramadi

Ramadi, a city of half a million people, was liberated in December 2015. In the process, however, the city suffered extensive damage. The United Nations reported that the level of destruction was "worse than any other part of Iraq."[59] Satellite imagery showed that 2,000 of the city's 5,700 buildings were destroyed. Ramadi was also heavily contaminated with improvised explosive devices. According to experts cited by the UNDP, Ramadi could be one of the most IED-contaminated cities in the world.[60] As a result, IDP returns did not begin until March 2016, three months after the city was liberated.[61]

Infighting between local Sunni Arab leaders also complicated the return of displaced people. The Sunni Endowment Diwan called for returns before the governor of Anbar had deemed it appropriate. Under pressure, the governor altered his position and called for returns before the city had been cleared of IEDs. IEDs subsequently killed some 200 returnees, causing the Iraqi military to halt returns on April 24, 2016.[62] The primary stabilization activity in Ramadi continues to be the clearance of IEDs. The FFIS has been unable to carry out a full needs assessment.[63]

Sinjar

Sinjar was liberated in November 2015 by a combination of coalition airstrikes and Kurdish forces commonly known as the Peshmerga.[64] Intra-Kurdish rivalries delayed the retaking of Sinjar for months. These same rivalries continue to hinder stabilization, as does the overall Kurdish role in the liberation of an ethnically diverse and multisectarian town.[65] Further, widespread Islamic State abuses of Sinjar civilians have prevented many displaced people from returning. The U.S. State Department has declared that these abuses constitute genocide.[66] Many Yazidis refuse to return, fearing that they would once again be targeted.[67]

Sinjar also suffers from significant IED contamination. By the first quarter of 2016, the UNDP reported that with the exception of installing generators, "all interventions are frozen until a conducive environment is established."[68] The UNDP was forced to limit its programming to areas surrounding Sinjar in the hopes that these projects would provide "evidence of stabilization" for communities that otherwise feel abandoned.[69] IED-clearing operations have recorded some progress in the second quarter of 2016, but the UNDP stressed that in Sinjar, "significant work is yet to start."[70]

Analytical findings

While the military campaign against the Islamic State is making steady progress, stabilization efforts are lagging behind. The effort is negatively affected by its insufficient integration into the wider counter-ISIL coalition campaign. Within Iraq, political division and dysfunction, as well as a weak prime minister, limit the potential for stabilization to facilitate national reconciliation. Regionally, an escalation in tensions between Iran and Saudi Arabia—and the perception among the latter and its allies that Iraq is an Iranian proxy—have constrained fundraising. Finally, the return of IDPs—the coalition's chief benchmark for stabilization success—has not kept pace with military operations to liberate territories.

Stabilization has not kept pace with military progress against IS

Progress on the battlefield is outperforming efforts to stabilize communities liberated from the Islamic State. Citizens who fled the fighting have begun to return in some areas, but the total number of people displaced by the IS crisis continues to rise. In areas where returnees have come home, funding and project implementation to restore basic services and rehabilitate infrastructure has been uneven. IED contamination makes liberated areas unfit for return months after military operations end. Public security remains a concern. According to the United Nations, not enough is being done to prevent retaliation against local populations.[71] In some cases, the composition of military forces involved in liberation complicates post-conflict stabilization. A senior U.S. general explained, "We are redrawing the political boundaries in Iraq through our anti-ISIL operations."[72] These gains often come at the expense of Sunni Arabs. The United Nations reports that the resulting tensions have delayed efforts to stabilize the areas.[73]

Leadership and coordination for stabilization efforts are insufficiently robust

No official interviewed for this study could identify the individual or entity in charge of stabilization. The Coalition Working Group on Stabilization has few substantive responsibilities beyond information sharing and some fundraising. The United Nations is responsible for implementation on the ground, but has institutional limits on access to military campaign planning. There is no civilian head or counterpart to the commanding general of Operation Inherent Resolve in Baghdad: As one seasoned official observed, "There is no civilian leader to play Ambassador Crocker opposite Gen. Petraeus."[74] The head of the UNDP in Iraq, Lise Grande, has stepped up to play a leadership role, but she is not part of the counter-ISIL coalition chain of command. The effect has been to weaken coordination between stabilization and other coalition lines of effort. U.S. senior military commanders in Operation Inherent Resolve work through the Office of the Secretary of Defense and the Joint Chiefs of Staff to communicate with the civilian elements of the coalition and have little visibility of civilian activities such as stabilization.[75]

Local stabilization is disconnected from a national framework for reconciliation

Most leading academics and senior coalition officials interviewed for this report observed that reconciliation between Baghdad and Iraq's Sunni Arab communities is essential to defeating the Islamic State. The United States has a strategy to support national reconciliation in Iraq, but it does not appear to be linked to local stabilization efforts. In theory, the lack of connectivity between national reconciliation and local stabilization is problematic. In practice, the implications of this disconnect are more nuanced. In areas such as Ramadi and Tikrit, sectarian and ethnic homogeneity may make local stabilization possible without national reconciliation. In other areas, prospects for stabilization are complicated by long-standing disputes that cannot be settled at the local level. The UNDP identifies the disputed boundary areas of Ninevah, Salah Al Din, and Diyala as regions where "ethnic and sectarian politics … challenge UNDP ability to implement stabilization activities."[76]

The success of stabilization is linked to regional dynamics

Stabilization in Iraq is also constrained by and has implications for the ongoing regional competition for power between the Gulf states and Iran. If the coalition fails to help meet the short-term needs of civilian populations in liberated areas, these Sunni Arab communities will have little motivation to pledge allegiance to Baghdad. This in turn could threaten long-term prospects for national unity, as well as a regional equilibrium dependent on a unitary Iraqi state.

At the same time, the Gulf states remain deeply suspicious of Iranian influence over the government in Baghdad. This sentiment has only grown more acute with the expanded role of the Popular Mobilization Forces in the fight against the Islamic State. Gulf states are therefore reluctant to pay for stabilization or longer-term reconstruction of a country they consider to be an Iranian proxy.[77] While American lobbying has unlocked some funding for stabilization from some Gulf states, normalized ties between these states and Iraq will be critical for sustained assistance.

A failure to break this logjam will undercut the chances for short-term stabilization and long-term reconstruction. It also bodes ill for any plan to reorient U.S. policy for the Middle East around a vision of strategic burden-sharing in the region and to reinforce the notion that Iraq is "America's problem," according to one White House official.[78] Some form of de-escalation between the Gulf and Baghdad will be required.

Stabilization has been significantly underfunded

To date, lack of funding has been a significant problem. The United States has spent $7.5 billion on military operations since the inception of the campaign. By contrast, of the $200 million pledged to the Funding Facility for Immediate Stabilization, only $81.7 million was received as of June 2016 according to a UNDP official. Following the July 2016 pledging conference, the State Department announced another $125 million in new pledges for the FFIS.[79] These pledges will help but are unlikely to fully cover outstanding stabilization needs in liberated areas. In this regard it will be critical to determine how the remaining $350 million in unspecified stabilization pledges from the July 2016 conference are to be spent. In addition, it will be essential that new pledges are disbursed in a timely fashion. It may also be necessary to revisit the mechanisms for spending these funds and implementing projects on the ground in highly dynamic environments.

IDP returns are lagging significantly behind advances on the battlefield

To date, Iraqi forces supported by the counter-ISIL coalition have successfully pushed the Islamic State out of 47 percent of the territory that it controlled at its height, and more than 700,000 IDPs have returned home.[80] Yet the number of Iraqis displaced by the crisis grew steadily through April 2016 and now hovers at around 3.2 million people. Only one governorate—Irbil—has seen the return of more than half of its displaced population. Part of the problem may be a lack of security; this is not an issue that the United Nations is equipped to address. But part of the problem may also be the allocation of stabilization funding and projects across governorates. In addition, certain sectors have received insufficient funding. The breakdown of customary justice mechanisms—including monetary compensation for property destruction and casualties of war—are key factors in motivating reverse displacement. Families and communities returning home expect to see reconciliation measures in a matter of months. Yet only 2 percent of UNDP stabilization funding has so far been allocated to facilitate reconciliation.[81]

Policy recommendations

The military fight in Iraq against the Islamic State is far from over. But large swathes of the country have already been liberated, and it is essential that the U.S.-led Global Coalition to Counter ISIL makes a modest but important down payment to help stabilize communities in these areas. The obstacles to success are significant, but the lessons of the recent past underscore the price of failure. In order to lock in recent military gains, the United States and its coalition partners should take the following steps.

Strengthen leadership for stabilization and integrate it into other coalition lines of effort

Leadership for stabilization should be strengthened among the counter-ISIL coalition member states in Baghdad. One option would be to appoint a Baghdad-based ambassador—who is preferably also a member of the CWGS—to serve as the civilian lead for stabilization on the ground. This civilian lead would coordinate the work of coalition members in support of UNDP and the prime minister's stabilization task force. Such an ambassador could also establish benchmarks or metrics to measure the progress of stabilization beyond the return of internally displaced people. The coalition also needs to fully integrate stabilization into other coalition lines of effort—particularly the military elements—at both strategic and tactical levels. A civilian lead could help with integration, particularly if the individual is a senior official from a coalition country with troops in Iraq. To facilitate integration, a formal coordination mechanism should be established to link stabilization tasks with Operation Inherent Resolve.

Strengthen U.S. bilateral support for stabilization

The United States should strengthen its bilateral commitment to stabilization in Iraq. While stabilization has emerged as a line of effort for the global coalition, it is not one of the U.S. government's nine lines of effort. The coalition does not

yet benefit from the full resources and capabilities of the United States in this area. The Obama administration should therefore consider adding stabilization as a dedicated bilateral line of effort. It should also mobilize resources from the State Department's Bureau of Conflict and Stabilization Operations and the U.S. Agency for International Development's, or USAID's, Office of Transition Initiatives to support stabilization efforts in Iraq. These offices have extensive experience working by, with, and through national and local authorities in conflict zones. One option would be to establish an interagency stabilization task force with representation from the State Department, USAID, and the Pentagon. Congress will need to allocate additional funds via civilian agencies and/or the military. The U.S. Central Command reports that restrictions on its Title V funding preclude spending on stabilization.[82]

Such a commitment is necessary in the short term to support a weak government and ensure that U.S. military gains are not squandered. However, it must rest on the explicit understanding that Iraq's government must display its own serious commitment to national reconciliation and working toward achieving legitimacy in the eyes of its people—especially as stabilization support leads to discussions of reconstruction support down the line.

Undertake U.S. diplomatic regional outreach to reduce tensions between Baghdad and the Gulf states and build support for stabilization

Reduced tensions between the Gulf states and Baghdad are critical to long-term stability in Iraq and the Middle East. The United States can help create the environment for diplomatic de-escalation between the Gulf and Baghdad by identifying practical steps both parties can take to lower tensions and build confidence. With coalition support, Prime Minister al-Abadi could do more to meet the immediate needs of Sunni Arabs in liberated communities. The Iraqi government could appoint a high-level Sunni envoy to oversee this effort and help coordinate international support. The Iraqi government could also create an independent and accountable stabilization authority to guard against corruption—a major donor concern. Such steps could persuade the Gulf states to allocate more funding for short-term stabilization with a view toward making a deeper commitment to the long-term reconstruction if the initial investment pays dividends. This sequenced approach would have the added benefit of sending a signal of commitment to reconciliation to Iraq's international donors as well.

Develop a "day after" plan to govern Mosul before military liberation

Coalition military support to counter IS operations is affecting the balance of political power in disputed areas of Iraq. Complications are already arising in some areas that have long been the subject of territorial dispute. Longstanding contests between Kurds and Sunni Arabs over geographical control are being exacerbated by the former's role in the liberation of key towns such as Sinjar and Kirkuk.[83] This trend could have a negative impact on local stabilization and attempts to broker reconciliation with Iraq's Sunni Arab communities. The liberation of Mosul will be critical in this regard. While Kurdish forces may have little interest in exerting long-term control over the city itself, the same cannot be said for surrounding towns and villages. The U.S.-led coalition should ensure that key forces involved in the liberation of Mosul and surrounding towns and villages have a shared understanding of how these areas are to be governed once they are cleared of the Islamic State.

Undertake a strategic review of the drivers of continued displacement and instability

The Coalition Working Group on Stabilization should undertake a strategic review of the main drivers of continued instability and displacement in Iraq. If the rate of IDP returns is the coalition's key indicator for measuring stability, the latter has not kept pace with progress on the battlefield, and it is important to understand why this is the case. Further, the rationale behind the allocation of stabilization resources across governorates is not clear. The Ninevah and Diyala governorates currently host a similar number of returnees—130,000 and 139,000, respectively—but Diyala has received less than one-quarter of Ninevah's total stabilization budget. Finally, only 2 percent of the stabilization funding has been spent on local reconciliation initiatives, despite the fact that many displaced families expect to see movement in this area within months of returning.

Accelerate the disbursement of donor pledges and strengthen capacity to implement on the ground

The July pledging conference raised $125 million in support of FFIS activity. The United States must maintain pressure on donors to deliver on their commitments much faster than they have done so to date. The conference also raised $350 million in additional undefined stabilization funding. It will be important to quickly

clarify where, how, and on what this money is to be spent. This funding should be directed to areas and sectors out of reach or underserved by the FFIS. A strategic review of the drivers of continued displacement, discussed above, can help in that regard. USAID's Office of Transition Initiatives and the United Kingdom's Stabilisation Unit should also consider the deployment of additional experts to support Prime Minister al-Abadi's office and reinforce the United Nations' ability to implement stabilization projects and other activities. Staff from these offices can imbed directly with coalition military assets and deploy to recently liberated but insecure environments to accelerate implementation.

Conclusion

Two years into the campaign against the Islamic State, Iraq looks set to liberate all of its IS-occupied territory. This is welcome news for a country that has been in the throes of one conflict or another for the past 13 years. It is also welcome news for the United States, which has dedicated significant blood and treasure toward ensuring that a stable and secure democracy is in place in Iraq.

A successful stabilization campaign is the necessary next step as territory is liberated. The United States must avoid the pitfalls of taking ownership of such a project but must also continue to be a committed partner of Iraq. This should take the form of an active engagement in the immediate post-conflict stabilization. It should also involve vigorously marshaling international—and, most importantly, regional—partners toward the effort. The United States must continue to provide leadership even as it continues to pursue a strategy of burden sharing.

Ultimately, the success of any of the efforts discussed in this report rest with Iraq's leaders. It is up to them to show leadership and commitment to securing the peace and preserving their country.

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