

EDA WORKING PAPER

Executive Summary

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

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- Over the past years, there has been a rapid expansion of stabilisation activities. Widely seen as offering a more realistic and less costly option to address the complex realities of state failure, stabilisation has emerged as a new platform for rethinking engagement in fragile settings.
- In the MENA region as well, there has been a growing appetite for stabilisation. With an interest in advancing regional stability in the MENA region, Arab Gulf States in particular have shown increasing desire to develop the instruments they need to support state-building, peace-building and development activities in conflict-affected countries across the region.
- Yet, despite its popularity, the conceptual and programmatic boundaries of stabilisation continue to be surprisingly elastic both in form and content. Indeed, it is still largely unclear what stabilisation is, what it is intended to achieve, and when it begins or ends.
- To better understand what makes stabilisation distinctive from competing concepts and practices, it seems useful to look at a variety of international attempts to build the conceptual and institutional toolkit for stabilisation activities. In particular, this paper reviews four Euro-Atlantic countries with experience leading stabilisation responses (the United Kingdom, Canada, the United States and France). Stabilisation practices in major intergovernmental bodies (European Union, the United Nations, and NATO) are also examined.
- At its core, stabilisation involves the mobilization of a combination of military, political, development and humanitarian resources and actions. To make these combinations work in practice, most governments have opted for a whole-of-government approach, developing various interagency structures and coordination mechanisms to plan and manage stabilisation activities.
- Looking across governmental experience reviewed in this paper, this process has typically faced three primary barriers: 1) a strategic gap; 2) a civilian gap; and 3) a cultural gap. While effective leadership seems key to address possible gaps in strategic oversight, the civilian and cultural gaps require a more sustained engagement across government.
- Along with these institutional innovations, governments have also issued a variety of documents to inform strategic and operational choices they make with regard to stabilisation activities. In most cases, however, major doctrinal documents produced on this subject remain vague about the scope and objectives.
- At the heart of the problem lies the disagreement about whether stabilisation should be defined more narrowly – as the management of acute crises – or more broadly, portraying state fragility as the main challenge, therefore causing a considerable amount of confusion about the nature of the task and the goals to be achieved.
- Yet, following the Iraq and Afghanistan experience, there is today a distinct trend towards more realistic, less ambitious goals for stabilisation activities. In this approach, stabilisation is not a conflict prevention method, nor is it the antidote to long-term state fragility but the exceptional toolkit to build resilience and pave the way for longer-term recovery.
- Even a narrow approach, however, cannot afford to be based on short-term perspectives or rigid timelines. In fact, there is no predetermined period for stabilisation – it can range from months to years. Success in stabilisation missions thus largely depends on the level of political will and investment necessary for a planned and (sometimes) prolonged effort.

How Can Arab Gulf States Support Regional Stabilisation Efforts:

- Arab Gulf States with experience contributing to regional stabilisation efforts could consider exploring ways to develop the institutional designs required to prepare for, design, execute, monitor and evaluate these activities.
 - While in principle there is no single “best” solution – each whole-of-government approach being shaped by a government’s particular political culture, legal framework and financial resources – the focus should be on establishing policies and processes that would help achieve better coordination between defence, security, diplomacy and development.
 - Similarly, Arab Gulf States could also consider training a cadre of government employees working on stabilisation issues or in conflict-affected countries. This could be complemented by the establishment of a staff roster to ensure that stabilisation operations are timely as well as staffed by personnel with relevant skills, training and experience. Importantly, training content will need to address planning and operational requirements in a range of different instability contexts.
- In addition, stabilisation efforts must be rigorously evaluated. Lessons from previous operations need to be learned and applied in future endeavours. As such, it is worth highlighting the importance of developing robust measures of effectiveness for stabilisation programmes.
 - Finally, it is crucial that Arab Gulf States rigorously define their conception of stabilisation, including the scope and objectives of these activities. In particular, this should help clarify what stabilisation efforts will aim to achieve and where these efforts are geographically focused.
 - As such, considering lessons learned from past stabilisation missions, Arab Gulf Countries could consider adopting a narrower approach focused on efforts to move on from situations of acute crises and large-scale violence in conflict-affected countries. In the MENA region, this would currently include countries such as Yemen, Libya, Syria, Somalia, Iraq.