

PRACTICE NOTE OPEN ACCESS

Stabilizing Postwar Iraq: The Practical Antinomies of a Promising Concept

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Received: 29 April 2024 | **Revised:** 13 December 2024 | **Accepted:** 24 December 2024

Funding: The authors received no specific funding for this work.

Keywords: international coalition against Daesh | postwar Iraq | stabilization | UNDP

ABSTRACT

Over the last decade, stabilization has gained ground as a pragmatic, short-term response to conflict and terrorism. While efforts to achieve a shared-upon doctrinal understanding of this international practice proved inconclusive, stabilization work in Iraq since 2014 offers valuable insights to evaluate the relevance of the concept and the challenges it faces in its implementation. This article assesses the antinomies of stabilization in the context of Iraq, where both the Global Coalition against Daesh and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) have undertaken a wide range of military and civilian-led stabilization activities following the defeat of the Islamic State (IS). Although these activities have contributed to the restoration of a basic sense of “normalcy,” including the return home of almost five million internationally displaced persons (IDPs), structural constraints, such as increasing authoritarianism, continue to hinder Iraq's path toward self-sustaining peace and development.

1 | Introduction

In response to the rapid expansion of the Islamic State (IS) across territories in northern Iraq and Syria, in September 2014 former US President Barack Obama announced the formation of the Global Coalition against Daesh. Drawing together a large number of international and regional partners, the Global Coalition aimed to defeat IS and stabilize liberated areas. At the request of the Government of Iraq, while combat operations were still ongoing, in June 2015 the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) established the Funding Facility for Immediate Stabilization (FFIS). This initiative aimed to provide civilian-led assistance for small-scale infrastructural projects immediately following the liberation of territories across five governorates: Anbar, Diyala, Kirkuk, Ninewa, and Salah Al Din. Due to the Iraqi government's inability to sustain the restoration of large-scale infrastructure, the scope of the FFIS expanded through the Funding Facility for Extended Stabilization

and, in April 2016, the two facilities merged into the Funding Facility for Stabilization (FFS).

With financial and political support from the Coalition's partners, UNDP's activities were organized into four primary areas of engagement: public works and infrastructure rehabilitation, livelihood activities, technical capacity building for local governments, and community reconciliation. UNDP's stated objective was to strengthen “government and communities' resilience to disasters (man-made and natural)” (UNDP 2016). The guiding principle behind its work in areas liberated from the IS is encapsulated in the concept of “stabilization,” which has gained increasing popularity in both academic and policy circles as a result of a pragmatic shift away from ambitious and large-scale democratization and peacebuilding programs. Indeed, the term “stabilization” was mentioned in United Nations (UN) Security Council meetings 59 times in 2001 but, by the time the war against IS started in 2014, this figure rose to 671 times (Curran and Holtom 2015, 8).

[Correction added on 3 April 2026, after first online publication: The copyright line was changed.]

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While often referred to by both analysts and policymakers, stabilization remains vaguely defined and poorly operationalized. Initially introduced in international operations in the former Yugoslavia in the 1990s, stabilization was subsequently pursued by ad hoc military coalitions in Afghanistan and Iraq. It was later integrated into UN peacekeeping operations in Haiti, Congo, Mali, and the Central African Republic. While UN headquarters in New York generally perceive stabilization as involving offensive military force, field staff tends to view it as civilian-led and development-driven work. The so-called “P3” countries (United States, United Kingdom, and France), which have played a key role in promoting the concept, describe stabilization as a means to address intra-state conflicts through a wide range of military and civilian activities (Belloni and Moro 2020; Gilder 2021). UNDP’s work in Iraq reflects this background but also signals a shift away from military-led stabilization toward a civilian-led approach, albeit one implemented in coordination with military actors.

Despite the increasing importance of stabilization as a potential alternative to peacebuilding (Paris 2024), both UN agencies and Western states have approached stabilization efforts based on unstated assumptions and drawing from significantly different understandings of what it entails (Will, Vinci, and Young 2022). Meanwhile, the academic debate has focused on identifying differences between macro-level policy paradigms—including in particular peacebuilding and stabilization—without thoroughly examining how stabilization engages with local dynamics. Consequently, drawing from opinion polls, surveys, and interviews, this article aims to address two gaps: it shifts the analysis from definitional aspects of stabilization to the exploration of its practical consequences on the ground and from the discussion on the pros and cons of each policy paradigm to the concrete objectives and antinomies emerging in the process of implementation.

First, this article examines the relations between military stabilization and its civilian components, frequently identified together as constituting the humanitarian, peace, and development nexus. In both its military- and civilian-led applications, security remains a central theme across various stabilization cases. Restoring basic levels of security is a core feature of stabilization, often involving the use of force in support of one of the conflicting parties, usually the host government. At the same time, programs under the stabilization framework frequently incorporate a range of early development activities in socioeconomic, health, sanitation, and education areas. These activities are crucial for building support around the emerging political order and delivering security benefits. In short, stabilization efforts are carried out along the humanitarian, development, and peace nexus, even though the way they contribute to each of these goals remains unclear.

Second, this article draws on nearly a decade of stabilization work in Iraq to evaluate the utility of the concept as well as the accomplishments and challenges in steering the country toward a future of peace and development. The effectiveness of stabilization on the ground, and its ability to achieve its stated objectives, is still a matter of debate. The lack of a widely accepted stabilization doctrine has contributed to its popularity as a field of practice (Adler and Pouliot 2011), allowing different actors to

selectively interpret and implement stabilization based on their strategic and tactical needs. However, this flexibility has made stabilization efforts vulnerable to local contextual dynamics. While the pragmatic approach of stabilization allows it to adapt to different intervention contexts, it also contributes to entangling it in local dynamics.

2 | Framing Stabilization in Iraq

Since 2014 the International Coalition Against Daesh led an extensive military operation in coordination with the Iraqi government, the Kurdistan Regional Government, and other local actors, which ended in December 2017 with the announcement of the liberation of Mosul. This military campaign can be situated along a spectrum of doctrines involving the use of force—robust peacekeeping, counterterrorism, and counterinsurgency—without fitting neatly into any of them. The UN endorses robust peacekeeping in order to deploy force at the tactical level with the consent of the host authorities and, in the process, to defend the mission’s mandate “against spoilers whose activities pose a threat to civilians or risk undermining the peace process” (UN 2008, 98). Military-led stabilization partakes with robust peacekeeping its main objective, that is, the “extension and restoration of state authority” (UN 2015, 44), but its understanding of force is closer to a peace enforcement notion involving violence deployed at the strategic or international level (UN 2008, 19). At the same time, even though peace enforcement and stabilization approve of the use of force, they are conceptually different since the latter acknowledges that military efforts alone cannot achieve their objectives but need to be combined with political, economic, and social efforts.

Stabilization’s objective of extending or restoring authority through the neutralization of armed nonstate actors is also shared with counterterrorism and counterinsurgency and implies the adoption of a “war logics of ally and enemy” (Duarte and Souza 2024). The ultimate military goal is to clear an area of identified enemies (frequently defined as “spoilers” or “terrorists”) and then keep it safe for the civilian population even though, in the process, the increased militarization may threaten both human security goals and UN’s impartiality (Gilder 2021). Counterterrorism and counterinsurgency, however, differ in the amount of force employed. The former is premised upon the willingness to apply massive force against terrorists, while the latter is based on the “clear, hold and build” logic, which involves the instrumental use of violence to shift population’s loyalty away from extremist groups and toward domestic institutions (Boyle 2010). In practice, it is difficult to simultaneously achieve the three main goals of force protection, the distinction between enemy combatants and noncombatants, and the physical elimination of insurgents (Zambernardi 2010). Following the limited impact of counterinsurgency efforts undertaken in the late 2000s and early 2010s in Iraq, international members of the Global Coalition took on mostly counter-terrorist activities through remote warfare, while the task of counterinsurgency was left to local actors, who strove to (re)affirm their authority under challenge by IS (Belloni and Costantini 2019).

The military defeat of IS in late 2017 had immediate consequences for the civilian population. At the peak of its expansion,

IS controlled approximately one-third of Iraqi territory, mostly inhabited by the Sunni Arab population and various minorities and provoked the displacement of around 6 million people (Iraq Durable Solutions 2021). As Iraqi and international forces reclaimed and secured territory from IS, IDPs began to return to their homes. By August 2024, approximately 4.9 million Iraqis had returned as a result of the close collaboration between domestic authorities and international civilian and military actors involved in stabilization efforts.¹ UNDP's FFS prioritized the objective of facilitating the return of IDPs to their homes promptly following the cessation of facilities. To achieve this, it liaised with the Global Coalition in order to obtain the necessary security guarantees for accessing liberated areas swiftly. Concurrently, the Government of Iraq identified the towns and villages that should have been targeted for UNDP intervention. This close partnership with both military and governmental entities in coordinating humanitarian efforts distinguished UNDP's stabilization activities from humanitarian principles, which require the formulation and implementation of policies independently of government priorities and only on the basis of assessed needs.

UNDP endorsed a civilian-led stabilization approach that involved swift actions in both entering liberated areas and implementing its activities. This emphasis on "quick fixes" contrasts with the time-consuming process of conflict assessment and sensitivity and is poorly suited to favor the adoption of structural solutions to address the root causes of instability. Instead, UNDP viewed stabilization as preceding development, that is, as a tool laying the initial groundwork for subsequent long-term social and economic enhancement, for which local authorities bear ultimate responsibility. From this perspective, stabilization is understood as a necessary step to establish a level of "normalcy" in daily life by providing basic security assurances, restoring essential services, and facilitating access to livelihood opportunities.

3 | Stabilizing Iraq: A Model to Emulate...?

The implementation of UNDP's stabilization program has been marked by several defining features. To begin with, UNDP led a "stabilization compact" where partners collaborated as one team with distinct responsibilities. This aimed to overcome the comparative advantage coordination model, in which each partner contributes according to its specific technical and professional expertise. Instead, the stabilization compact is a single-agency intervention model aimed at enhancing the efficiency of both decision-making and the impact of activities on the ground. "Triple-hatting", involving an individual simultaneously playing the roles of UN Resident Coordinator, Humanitarian Coordinator, and UNDP Resident Representative, was embodied in a single person and provided UNDP with the necessary institutional leadership to navigate a rapidly changing and structurally insecure environment.

To enhance and bolster the government's legitimacy in the eyes of the local population, UNDP adopted a "no branding policy" and relied on the government to identify priority areas where to intervene. With the support of Iraqi authorities, UNDP was able to access liberated areas sometimes as early as within 24 h from

the cessation of hostilities. While the Iraqi government identified target areas, it did not assume responsibility for the day-to-day management of projects or procurement matters, which fell under UNDP's purview. UNDP established a Service Centre equipped to host at full capacity as many as seventy procurement officers, enabling the adoption of economies of scale and thus reducing overall procurement costs. In addition, a zero-tolerance policy on corruption was adopted. This policy was important in a context characterized by widespread corruption. Although UNDP's stance could not lead to the full eradication of corruption, as further discussed below, it conveyed the institutional commitment to address mismanagement rather than turn a blind eye to it.

With a budget of US\$ 1.55 billion, the FFS was able to implement a wide array of projects. This substantial amount was allocated to rebuild infrastructure and housing and provide economic opportunities for returnees, resulting in a significant multiplier effect on the local economy. In total, more than 3600 projects have been completed across five liberated governorates, positively impacting the lives of more than 8 million people. Furthermore, six national universities and 630 schools were rehabilitated and equipped, while the reconstruction of roads and bridges improved citizens' access to newly rebuilt public health centers. The rehabilitation of nearly 40,000 houses facilitated the return of many families to their homes. Additionally, almost 50,000 cash-for-work opportunities, along with small business grants and cash grants, supported individuals striving to restart their lives (UNDP 2024). The role of international organizations in stabilization is widely recognized by the local population, as the following quote from a civil society activist in the city of Mosul illustrates:

With great regret, I will say that the international organizations [have done the most in reconstructing Mosul] because the central government was supposed to doing this big and effective role. Iraq has huge budgets that can build 10 cities like Mosul, but corruption and politicians have destroyed the whole of Iraq, not just Mosul. International organizations have restored and rehabilitated many important and service places such as schools, health centers, power stations, water stations, archaeological places and recreational places.²

The restoration of services acted as a pulling factor for IDPs. While a significant portion of reconstruction efforts was undertaken by returning IDPs using their own financial resources (Bryant 2019), the scale and rapidity of UNDP's activities facilitated large-scale returns. In addition, although the focus of stabilization initially prioritized speed in the implementation of projects, it gradually transitioned from restoring preconflict conditions to "building back better." This involved enhancements such as installing accession ramps and solar systems to improve the functionality of buildings. In sum, the return of nearly 5 million Iraqis displaced since IS' defeat undercores the significance of UNDP's work. Bolstered by these notable achievements, UNDP regards the FFS as a "success story", with its lessons potentially applicable to other contexts such as Gaza

and Ukraine where stabilization efforts will likely be crucial once hostilities cease.

The extensive number of projects implemented, along with the return of IDPs, serve as positive quantitative indicators of UNDP's successful implementation of FFS projects. In addition to these metrics, qualitative indicators provide further information to explain the conditions people found upon their return from displacement. In particular, the Return Index, managed by the International Organization for Migration, serves as a valuable tool for evaluating the impact of stabilization from the perspective of Iraqi returnees and their communities (IOM 2024). It monitors and measures the quality of life across nearly 2000 locations affected by the 2014–17 war against IS. Through 16 indicators, it provides evidence concerning both humanitarian and development aspects, such as housing, livelihoods, and essential services, as well as citizens' perspectives on social cohesion and security issues. In essence, the Index provides data on the humanitarian–development–peace nexus, which the UN has identified as the framework for addressing the complexities of contemporary conflicts (IASC 2016).

Although the Index's indicators are selected by international actors in consultation with partners and stakeholders and may not fully reflect local understandings of key terms such as “peace” and “security” (Firchow 2018), they provide useful insights into how the situation has evolved since the beginning of stabilization activities. Data from the Index indicates an improvement in the quality of life concerning humanitarian and development indicators following the defeat of IS. However, data on the perception of security and social cohesion among the population reveals the presence of continuing challenges (Siddiqui and Guu 2024). Above all, from the perspective of the returnees, stabilization had a positive impact but, perhaps counterintuitively given the importance of the military component of the operation against IS, it fell short with regard to addressing populations' security concerns—as further explained below.

4 | ... or a Model to Avoid?

Although stabilization efforts are aimed at restoring a sense of “normalcy” in day-to-day life, security conditions are still precarious. While the defeat of the IS marked the end of large-scale military operations, Iraqi citizens still experience a pervasive sense of insecurity. The conclusion of major hostilities has seen the resurgence of old and new divisions among the Federal government, the Kurdistan Regional Government, political parties and their armed factions, militias, and local authorities. Political and military influence continues to be distributed among numerous actors competing to steer Iraq's postwar course according to their own respective interests and priorities.

At the military level, the campaign against the IS entrenched the presence of nonstate armed actors across the country. The Popular Mobilization Forces played a significant role in defeating IS. They comprised of armed actors affiliated with different political parties and identity groups, the most powerful

of which are Shia militias with close ties with Iran. While initially they garnered support from the population, over time the presence and growing strength of Iran-backed actors have been perceived as threatening or even hostile by some segments of the population (Haddad 2020). For instance, the following quote provides evidence of the perception of insecurity in the governorate of Ninewa:

I, as an Arab (Sunni) citizen today, cannot go to the Ninewa Plain areas, because of the checkpoints at the entrances to the Ninewa Plain cities. For example, in the city of Bashiqa, no one can enter the area without the presence of a resident of Bashiqa at the checkpoint and giving the officer sufficient justification.³

As this quote suggests, militias have become increasingly unpopular due to their perceived arbitrary operations and reported abuses against civilians (Parry 2022; Costantini and O'Driscoll 2023). Although stabilization efforts were never tasked with reforming the security sector, the lack of strategic analysis regarding the long-term security ramifications of the war against IS has contributed to validating the presence of divisive nonstate armed groups, whose influence is felt not only with regard to security but also across social, political, and economic life. If the presence of armed nonstate groups was tolerated during the stabilization process, their continued existence undermines stabilization's long-term objective of achieving sustainable peace (Johansen et al. 2020).

The security situation has implications for both IDPs and those awaiting to return. Despite extensive international and domestic efforts, 1 million individuals have yet to return home. Families perceived to have ties with IS remain displaced, facing challenges to their return on both political and social fronts. In addition, despite the efforts of both military and civilian stabilization actors, some districts remain volatile and insecure. For instance, Sinjar, home to a significant portion of the Yazidi ethno-religious minority, poses a major challenge. In particular, the volatile situation in the area has been a major reason preventing the return of Yazidi women survivors (CIGE 2020). In October 2020, Baghdad and Erbil signed an agreement aimed at fostering stability in Sinjar through the establishment of a new administration and security framework, which should have guaranteed and supported the return of IDPs. However, the agreement has only been partially implemented, with Sinjar increasingly becoming embroiled in a destabilizing geopolitical competition between neighboring Turkey and Iran (ICG 2022).

This situation underscores Iraq's ongoing fragile state-society relations. While the prominence of identity politics in Iraq has somewhat diminished in recent years (Jabar 2018), any dissenting voice challenging the existing political system rooted in identity politics is met with little or no tolerance. Tensions along identity lines persist at both the national and local levels and overlap with center–periphery ones. While local authorities are usually recognized by the population as more legitimate than national ones, their role in stabilization efforts is seen as marginal. The following quote for instance highlights some of the problematic issues at the governorate level:

The role of the governor is like an arbiter, meaning that he does not make decisions independently. [...] The administration is plagued by financial corruption. Projects are distributed and planned in an unstudied and random manner. Ninewa Governorate received 700 million dollars from the central government in the year 2021, but we did not see projects corresponding to this money⁴.

Poor preparation to support stabilization at the local level was compounded by the lack of a shared understanding among local and national partners regarding the meaning of stabilization (Johansen et al. 2020). The limited adoption of decentralization measures underscores the presence of bureaucratic inefficiencies in the bloated public sector, which remains the primary employment option for citizens. The allocation of resources to local authorities remains sporadic and unreliable as a result of both political factors and bureaucratic incompetence. Government personnel undergo continuous rotation while inadequate staff training undermines efficiency in service delivery. Such circumstances perpetuate existing tensions and impede progress both in enhancing social cohesion and achieving a shared perception of security.

While security remains a challenge, another primary objective of stabilization activities has only been partially achieved. Stabilization explicitly aims to foster trust between communities and legitimate authorities. However, the vertical social contract in Iraq remains weak (Ardovini and O'Driscoll 2023). This feeds skepticism toward the role of national authorities in stabilization, as the following quote illustrates:

I think that the government does not want to rebuild Mosul, if it wanted to, four years were enough to notice a change in the city of Mosul, also we now do not trust the government and its promises in any way because we heard a lot and did not notice any progress, the government in fact cares about the apparent changes more than the real changes.⁵

The most recent Arab Barometer's poll, released in late 2022, revealed that Iraqis across the whole country have very little confidence in their institutions. Only 26% of citizens trust their national government, while local authorities and the legal system fare slightly better, with 33% and 40% support from the population, respectively (Arab Barometer VII 2022). Additionally, the Arab Barometer found that Iraqis are the only citizens in the MENA region who prioritize financial and administrative corruption over economic issues as the most pressing challenge facing their country. According to Transparency International, Iraq ranks 157 out of 180 countries worldwide in terms of the perception of corruption (Transparency International 2024). UNDP itself has faced corruption allegations regarding its activities during the implementation of FFS projects (The Guardian 2024).

In addition to country-wide data, a local perception survey with 702 respondents conducted in the city of Mosul in November–December 2023 confirms the tenuous link between citizens and national authorities. Designed to gauge

the local population's perceptions toward actors involved in stabilization activities, the survey shows that the majority of the interviewees had great expectations about the role of national governmental actors in providing humanitarian assistance, contributing to physical reconstruction, cultural heritage restoration and security, and furthering social cohesion. However, the majority of them ranked national actors as the ones that, ultimately, contributed the least to stabilization goals, with the exclusion of security. The gap between expectations and outcomes in Mosul confirms the sense of local disillusionment toward national political authorities that contrasts with stabilization's goal of rebuilding trust between local communities and institutions (Costantini 2024).

The deterioration of state-society relations occurred in parallel to the strengthening of national authorities' coercive capacities (Mansour 2019) and the related sliding toward authoritarianism. Authoritarian practices of control, surveillance, and repression emerged in response to the protest movement that erupted in the country in 2019. Demands for the reform of the existing political system were met with unprecedented brutality, resulting in the killing of at least 487 protestors (UNAMI and OHCHR 2020, 14). In this deteriorating context, in early 2024 the Economist Intelligence Unit's annual Democracy Index⁶ classified Iraq as "authoritarian", placing the country at the 128th position out of 167 states worldwide. Not only was this Iraq's lowest score since the Index was created in 2006 but also it marked the country's sixth consecutive fall since 2017. In brief, the score certified the continuing deterioration of democratic standards (EIU 2024).

Overall, corruption, mismanagement, and the decline in democracy standards underscore the limited attention given to governance matters in the implementation of stabilization activities. The stabilization's goal of restoring basic services and infrastructure is rooted in the idea of addressing the aftermath of conflict rather than tackling the underlying social and economic conditions that have fueled the country's recent descent into violence (Belloni and Costantini 2019). Stabilization activities in Iraq prove that the rapid restoration of basic services in the short term occurs with little regard for both the medium- and long-term democratic prospects of the country and the human security needs of the population.

5 | Conclusion

Stabilization is a practice in search of a doctrine. As a military-led practice, it shares with robust peacekeeping, counterterrorism, and counterinsurgency an endorsement of the use of force. However, its core goal of extending or restoring state authority is not limited to military control but requires a component of civilian-led humanitarian intervention and statebuilding efforts whose impact on the ground requires careful empirical analysis.

Stabilization efforts in Iraq did not address the root causes of conflict, violence, or instability. Rather, they entailed a series of short-term civilian-led activities aimed at restoring essential services, addressing immediate population needs, and enhancing the legitimacy of national institutions, all in coordination

with security actors. Short-term gains have paved the way to relatively stable conditions, but structural weaknesses remain in place. With international donors phasing out due to concerns for other crisis areas in the Middle East and Europe, an increasingly authoritarian regime is assuming growing responsibilities in guiding the country toward long-term stability.

In this context, the costs of existing stabilization projects are expected to be covered by the Iraqi national budget, which is heavily dependent on oil prices. Because of the absence of instruments to mitigate shocks in the oil market, Iraq remains vulnerable to financial instability. Although current oil prices (as of late 2024) enable the government to finance current spending, structural constraints limit the country's planning capacity both at the national and local levels and complicate the process of handover of stabilization activities (Johansen et al. 2020, 8–10). The sustainability of existing stabilization projects thus hinges on the potential to increase state revenues and enhance resource management efficiency. However, the reform and professionalization of the public sector, which is one of the key sources of patronage and clientelism within Iraq's dysfunctional governance, is a politically complex endeavor unlikely to occur in the foreseeable future.

Furthermore, the escalating tensions since the outbreak of the war in Gaza in late 2022 has also shown that Iraq remains vulnerable to regional volatility. These tensions have exposed the country to attacks targeting American bases by militias located on its territory and heightened concerns about the country's long-term political, social, and economic viability. The gradual reduction and closure of internationally-led stabilization activities thus coincide with a period of growing uncertainty and increased geopolitical competition, presenting Iraq and its citizens with growing challenges with unpredictable consequences. In this context, local authorities may succeed in preserving stability of a kind based on military control and patronage, but the goals of long-term peace and development remain elusive.

Data Availability Statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

Endnotes

- ¹Data on IDPs and Returnees are provided by IOM's Displacement Tracking System: <https://dtm.iom.int/iraq>.
- ²Interview with civil society activist, Mosul, 16 November 2021.
- ³Interview with civil society activist, Mosul, 12 November 2021.
- ⁴Interview with civil society activist, Mosul, 12 December 2021.
- ⁵Interview with civil society activist, Mosul, 15 November 2021.
- ⁶The EIU's Democracy Index provides a snapshot of the state of democracy worldwide based on five main indicators: electoral process and pluralism, functioning of government, political participation, political culture, and civil liberties.

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