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From Liberal Statebuilding to Counterinsurgency and Stabilization: the International Intervention in Iraq.

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# From Liberal Statebuilding to Counterinsurgency and Stabilization: the International Intervention in Iraq

**Abstract:** Stabilisation approaches have limited transformational ambitions, in particular when compared with previous large-scale peacebuilding interventions. The case of Iraq is illustrative of such an approach. It demonstrates how achieving stability in the country is no longer supposed to be the result of an overall political, economic and social transformation—as postulated in the initial phase of the intervention—but, rather, a precondition to it. This paper first identifies the circumstances under which stabilisation emerged in Iraq and then it traces its main characteristics. Second, it discusses the stabilisation approach of the two main international military and civilian actors: the Global Coalition against Daesh and the United Nations Development Programme. In conclusion, the paper argues that while stabilisation is likely to freeze the conflict, it remains to be seen whether it will be effective in solving it.

## 1. Introduction

Since the announcement of the end of major combat operations (1 May 2003), the Iraqi case has become paradigmatic of international statebuilding interventions. Despite its peculiarities, most notably the unilateralism of the intervention and the absence of a UN authorisation under Chapter VII of the UN Charter, “Iraq is the crucible in which post–Cold War theories of statebuilding were tested, found wanting, and then, in the heat of battle, forged anew” (Lake, 2016: 101). Before 2003, many missions in conflict-affected countries had a statebuilding component, but not as vast and costly as the Iraqi one, perhaps with the exception of Afghanistan. Since 2003, no other mission has been equally intrusive and pervasive. Moreover, the Iraqi intervention reflected the ethos of its age: at the beginning of the 2000s many policy-makers and some scholars believed that building effective states was possible and desirable to eradicate a variety of threats ranging from terrorism to authoritarianism and poverty (Fukuyama, 2004; Rotberg, 2004).

Fifteen years and three US presidents later, the optimistic mood of the early 2000s has vanished. Iraq is still in the midst of multiple and protracted political, security and economic crises. The imperatives of the War on Terror, which led the George W. Bush administration to plan and execute the invasion and occupation of Iraq in 2003, are still shaping international engagement in the country. The expansion of the self-styled Islamic State during 2014-16 mercilessly showed all the limits of the statebuilding intervention and forced the Barack Obama administration to conduct and lead another military coalition in the country. Meanwhile policy-makers and scholars increasingly began to doubt the possibility of building effective states in conflict-affected countries such as Iraq. This contribution not only examines the reasons behind these doubts but it takes the

analysis further by arguing that stabilization has substituted statebuilding as the reference operational framework in conflict-affected contexts such as Iraq.

In between the initial enthusiasm and the current disillusionment, three phases can be identified in the evolution of the international intervention in Iraq: the first period (2003-06) saw the radical application of the liberal statebuilding framework, with its firm belief in the possibility of transplanting democracy and a market economy. As the situation deteriorated, the second period (2007-2011) saw the elaboration and application of a new counterinsurgency strategy which focused on fighting the insurgents while winning the heart and minds of the population and improving state capacity to deliver services (Lake, 2016; Dodge, 2012). Encouraged by the military achievements gained through the “surge”, the Obama administration inaugurated a new phase of disengagement from the country (2011-). Announcing the end of the Operation Iraqi Freedom and the withdrawal of American troops, President Obama stated that “the Iraqi people now have lead responsibility for the security of their country” (Obama 2010 cited in: Cooper and Stolberg 2010). The emphasis on local responsibility, together with the international aversion to return to large-scale engagement, is what characterizes the current understanding of intervention in Iraq. This understanding became increasingly apparent after the mayhem brought about by the Islamic State in 2014 revived old questions on how international actors could best assist the country in its recovery.

This contribution adds to the large debate assessing the international intervention in Iraq (Dodge, 2013; Fawcett, 2013; Walt, 2012) by examining its evolution in 4 steps. First, it contextualizes the current international engagement in the changed geopolitical order involving the affirmation of alternative powers, namely Iran (regionally) and Russia (internationally). Second, it examines the evolving interpretation of stabilization by discussing the changing nature of Western interests and priorities.<sup>1</sup> Third, it unveils how Western actors while maintaining a rhetoric of democracy promotion and human rights have compromised their goals in the name of “security first”. Finally, this contribution discusses the related lowering of standards of success compared to previous engagements. Overall, the current understanding of stabilization focuses on the restoration of local authority structures while concerns for normative issues such as democracy or human rights have slipped down the list of international priorities. Accordingly, in Iraq the

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<sup>1</sup> We use ‘Western’ to indicate the plurality of actors from the Global North, including states, international organizations, and NGOs. This term is preferable to expressions such as ‘international community’ (which includes the word ‘community’ with its positive connotations that are not always warranted) and ‘liberal actors’ (which implies adherence to principles increasingly challenged even by self-identified liberal actors).

statebuilding approach which dominated intervention in conflict-affected states since the mid 1990s has been reversed: no longer is stability thought to emerge from the development of democratic and market-friendly states but, rather, international actors consider stability as the pre-condition of institutional and economic development.

## **2. The Geopolitical Context**

Since the 2003 invasion, Iraq has remained plagued by a number of serious problems, including cyclical violence and terrorism, the unrivalled role of ethno-sectarianism in political life, the depth and breadth of corruption, a democratic process stalled by seemingly insurmountable obstacles, the dire economic situation with a private sector and a labour market not capable of creating job opportunities for Iraqi youth, and the devastating human, social, and material consequences brought about by the US invasion, a civil war, and lately the Islamic State.<sup>2</sup>

Although some of the above conditions are found in other contexts, notably in the Balkans, and contribute to a mixed assessment of statebuilding experiences, the shortcomings of the Iraqi intervention have had a broader significance because of the gap between the expectations raised in 2003 and the current situation. Not only did the US-led intervention fail to produce a democratic and effective governance structure, but also it deepened hostile conditions towards Western engagement in the country, with the repercussions felt throughout the Middle East and beyond. In light of these failures, by the early 2010s international interveners had begun reconsidering their engagement in Iraq and the surrounding region. The sidelining of statebuilding and the related growing interest in stabilization among international actors constitutes the strategic response to both intervention fatigue and the changed geopolitical context.

While in 2003 US unilateralism was unchallenged in the region, the situation changed considerably overtime when it became increasingly clear that US influence on local politics in Iraq was declining steadily as another regional actor, Iran, was gradually gaining ground. Despite its historically conflictual relationship with neighbouring Iraq, Iran was first able to gain political terrain in the country through its support to formerly exiled oppositional figures. From there, greater Iranian influence was exercised on the military (through support for militias operating during the

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<sup>2</sup> While these are all important contributors to a condition of stability/instability, this contribution focuses the discussion on international actors, including their interpretation and implementation of the notion of stabilization.

2006-08 civil conflict), on the political system (through influence on political parties and authorities such as on the government of Nouri al-Maliki, Prime Minister from 2006 to 2014) and on the economy (through investment and trading activities) (Barzegar 2008). The near collapse of the Iraqi state at the hands of the Islamic State in June 2014 further enhanced Iran's role. Some militias within the *Hashd al-Shaabi*,<sup>3</sup> the popular mobilization forces created in response to the advancement of the Islamic State, remain financially and militarily loyal to Iran and evade Iraqi control, despite being legally under the authority of the Iraqi Prime Minister (Government of Iraq 2016; Mansour and Jabar 2017). However, despite its activism, Iranian penetration in Iraq through military, political, and economic influence has not translated into wide support among the population, which is still largely suspicious of Tehran's agenda (Mabon and Royle 2017).

The influence of Iran on its neighbour has contributed to the assessment by US officials and their allies that the implementation of ambitious political goals in Iraq was hindered by the presence of a local competitor. For instance, these concerns were raised in September 2012 in relation to Iran's use of Iraqi airspace to support Bashar al-Assad in Syria, despite US pressure against it. In that circumstance Secretary of State John Kerry stated:

If so many people have entreated the government [of Iraq] to stop and that doesn't seem to be having an impact, that sort of alarms me... it just seems completely inappropriate that we're trying to help build their democracy, support them, put American lives on the line, money into the country and they're working against our interest so overtly (Kerry 2012).

With this comment John Kerry well expressed the US frustration with regard to the growing Iranian hold on Iraq, and the resulting geopolitical competition between the US and Iran. Torn between antagonistic projects, as recently as October 2017, the Prime Minister, Haider al-Abadi (2014-2018), invited the US and Iran not to "bring [their] trouble inside Iraq" (Haider al-Abadi, quoted in: El-Ghobashy 2017).

Beyond Iraq, the 2011 upheavals across the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) pushed regional powers to re-position themselves in a renewed competitive chessboard at times mistakenly interpreted through the paradigm of sectarianism (Hashemi and Postel 2017). The two major regional players, Iran and Saudi Arabia, have escalated their competition in a new security complex that has been described as a New Cold Arab War (Valbjørn and Bank 2012; Gause 2017). In addition, after NATO's 2011 intervention in Libya morphed into regime change, proposals for an intervention

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<sup>3</sup> The *Hashd al-Shaabi* or Popular Mobilization Forces grouped existing and newly formed predominantly Shia armed militias that joined the fight against the Islamic State since 2014 (Mansour and Jabar 2017).

in Syria advanced at the UN Security Council found skeptical interlocutors. Russia, most of the time along with China, vetoed eight Security Council Resolutions on Syria between 2011 and 2017. Russia justified its backing of the regime of Bashar al-Assad as a response to the nefarious ramifications of regime change in Libya. According to Sergey Lavrov, Russian Foreign Minister,

[w]e helped and we continue to help the Syrian government equip the Syrian army with everything it needs to prevent [a repetition of] the Libyan scenario and other regretful events that happened in that region because some of our Western partners were possessed with the idea of removing undesirable regimes (Lavrov, cited: in PressTV 2015).

Bound together by a pragmatic alliance, Iran and Russia have been described as the new “power couple” in the Middle East, sharing a deep-seated resistance to US unilateralism and aversion towards “Western-led – or simply pro-Western – regime change, pursued either by military means or in the guise of so-called ‘colour revolutions’” (Geranmayeh and Liik, 2016: 2). Iran and Russia advanced their own blueprints with regard to how to “fix” fragile and conflict-affected countries, which involve strengthening a strong man through military, political and economic support. Taken together, terrorism, widespread civil conflict, and an escalating international and regional rivalry feed a perception of insecurity among European states and its allies, that is well expressed in the opening of the 2016 NATO Annual report: “at no time since the end of the Cold War has the NATO Alliance faced greater challenges to our security than it does today” (NATO 2016: 6).

This geopolitical scenario has contributed to the Western reconsideration of interventionism. An increasingly multi-polar international order has constrained Western ambitions to reshape the MENA region. Rising international powers, especially Russia, and regional powers (above all Iran, in addition to Saudi Arabia and Turkey) pose a new challenge to liberal interventionism because they are scarcely interested, if at all, in democratic conditionalities. Rather, they prefer to exert their influence through various military, diplomatic and economic means, which are deployed with little or no consideration for democratic or human rights issues. Western states have responded to this challenge by lessening their demands on weak and fragile states in general, and on Iraq in particular, and by lowering their declared transformative aspirations in foreign policy. Rather than invoking grand democratic ideals, Western states have veered towards a policy of stabilization aimed at coping with rather than solving external crises (i.e., migration issues, terrorist attacks, and so on).

### **3. Stabilising Iraq**

As frequently noted (see Introduction to this Special Issue) the meaning of stabilisation remains contested and, crucially, subjected to different interpretations between international and local actors, and even between local policy-makers. For instance, as a government official in Iraqi Kurdistan explains, stabilization:

is something around which there is not a shared understanding. What is stabilization? And how it is different from one place to the other? [...] We and our colleagues in Baghdad need first to have a proper understanding of what stabilization is, then we can talk about political will.<sup>4</sup>

Most understandings of stabilization, in Iraq as elsewhere, involve an appreciation of the role of both military and civilian actors in reaching a degree of stability. Accordingly, they prioritize security over governance achievements and, in the contexts of ongoing violence, set the goal of attaining a political settlement irrespective of democratic or human rights standards. In addition, stabilization operations are biased towards governmental authorities (no matter how poor or contested their control of territory or their compliance with human rights norms) and refrain from referring to or identifying specific governance benchmarks. The case of Iraq adds to these elements the conception of stabilization as the pre-condition to reach democratic governance and economic prosperity: if in 2003 the establishment of democratic institutions and the rule of law was thought to unleash the wind of freedom and provide the ground upon which stability could be built, fifteen years later Western interveners believe that stability can be pursued at the expense of liberty.

While since 2003 achieving stability in Iraq has always been an important international objective, the current operationalization of the term confirms that Western actors have profoundly revised their approach, reflecting the increasingly manifest failure of the statebuilding and democratization agenda. Two major initiatives, involving a wide range of actors, have shaped the current practice of stabilization on the ground. First, in response to the advancement of the Islamic State, in September 2014 the US led the creation of a *Global Coalition against Daesh*. Composed by more than 70 partners, the Global Coalition has a 'stabilization' mandate in addition to a counter-terrorism one consisting of countering the Islamic State's propaganda, tackling its financing and funding and impeding the flow of foreign fighters. Second, from a civilian perspective the UNDP established in June 2015 the Funding Facility for Immediate Stabilization (FFIS); in April 2016 it complemented it with a Funding Facility for Expanded Stabilization (FFES); and in 2018 it expanded it with a Recovery and Reconciliation Programme. These two initiatives testify to 3 key elements of

the internationally-driven stabilization efforts in Iraq as discussed below: they reflect a new understanding of Western interests, they show the abandonment of transformative aspirations, and they demonstrate the key role played by pragmatism in intervention and the related vagueness in identifying performance standards. Before turning to the discussion of these elements, Table 1 summarizes the components of stabilization involved in these two initiatives.

[Insert Table 1 here]

### **a) Western Interests and the Fight against Terrorism**

In the early 2000s Western states began to perceive a growing sense of insecurity due to the rise of a number of new threats. As a policy analyst argued at the time, “we in the West face a major challenge. It is the threat of weapons of mass destruction, terrorism, failed states and instability that arises in major part from extremist organizations in the Greater Middle East” (Lugar, 2004). This heightened awareness about new sources of insecurity was reflected in an emerging academic debate on state fragility and state collapse and the role of international actors in promoting democratic states, seen as an indispensable precondition to guarantee long-term stability, security and prosperity (Rotberg, 2004; Fukuyama, 2004). The justification for the 2003 intervention in Iraq emerged from this intellectual and policy background, and weaved together the concern for the destabilising effects of Saddam Hussein on the MENA region, the supposed presence of weapons of mass destruction and the regime’s support for international terrorism (Butt, 2019).

Terrorism in Iraq proved not to be the result of the previous regime’s support to extremist groups, but rather of the void left by the fall of the regime and the myopic policies pursued by international actors to fill it. Terrorist attacks inside Iraq started as early as summer 2003 and intensified during the 2006-08 period in what analysts described as the ‘first insurgency’. As violence peaked in the country, the US turned to counterinsurgency (COIN) measures combining coercive actions with initiatives aimed at winning Iraqi hearts and minds (Boyle, 2010: 343; Griffin, 2011). In a clear departure from the liberal statebuilding of 2003-06, COIN involved US civil and military actors in providing assistance to the population, primarily security (Lake, 2016: 125). The US army, for instance, engaged both in military operations and in small-scale humanitarian relief and reconstruction activities in order to pacify volatile areas and to provide legitimacy to the new political system and to the newly established domestic institutions. In addition, it reactivated the local economy in cleared areas through the Commander’s Emergency Response Programme (Dodge, 2013: 85). However, the security-development nexus underpinning counter-insurgency efforts



neither managed to eradicate the threat of terrorism nor to win the hearts and minds of the population. Scandals such as the Haditha massacre and Abu Ghraib abuses<sup>5</sup> alienated a large part of Iraqi citizens, and deepened anti-occupation and anti-US sentiments.

Since 2014 international actors distanced themselves from both the liberal and the COIN-oriented statebuilding. They focused on counterterrorist warfare leaving counterinsurgency tasks to the local authorities, with profound implications. Indeed, counterterrorism and counterinsurgency are based on different assumptions. First, the use of force can be ruthless in counterterrorism, but needs to be contained in counterinsurgency not to alienate the local population. Second, counterterrorism relies on the political capital of the government to authorise and justify often unpopular missions. Counterinsurgency, instead, has to build the political capital of local governments to shift population's loyalty away from extremist groups and towards domestic institutions (Boyle 2010). In the Iraqi case, the *Global Coalition against Daesh* operated on a counterterrorism mandate which presupposed the presence of a solid and effective Iraqi government - a problematic assumption.

Differently from a COIN-based approach, the *Global Coalition* engaged in traditional counterterrorism measures against the Islamic State but did not extend its mandate to other political objectives, such as building viable institutions, or economic ones, including the reactivation of local economic activities. Operating in both Iraq and Syria, its actions typified a recent tendency among Western countries, and particularly the US, towards avoiding on the ground combat operations while maintaining a superior air power and overall coordination of multilateral activities. As such, it did not include a hearts and minds component since the 'no boots on the ground' directive (with the exclusion of training) created an insurmountable distance between the externally-led military operation and the Iraqi population. Most on the ground fighting was delegated to local forces, foremost the Iraqi Security Forces and the Peshmerga, which Western actors hurried to prepare for war with no evaluation of potential consequences (ICG 2015). The consequences of this approach soon became clear: allegations of torture by Iraqi units (Ross et al 2017); allegations of human right violations by Peshmerga units (Human Rights Watch 2016); and clashes between local forces trained and equipped by foreign actors, such as between the Iraqi

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<sup>5</sup> In November 2005 in Haditha a team of US marines killed 24 Iraqi civilians, including unarmed women, children and elderly people. In the prison of Abu Ghraib, American soldiers and officials resorted to torture and abuses against Iraqi detainees, which were revealed in April 2004.

Security Forces and the Peshmerga following the controversial referendum for Kurdish independence on 25 September 2017.

Military training, the provision of weapons, and intelligence sharing served the objective of defeating the Islamic State but did not take into account the long-term goal of providing a solution to what caused the advancement of the Islamic State in the first place – above all the presence of a widespread system of poor governance (Costantini 2018). The US, as the key actor in the *Global Coalition*, framed its efforts to counter the Islamic State within a counterterrorism strategy (denying the Islamic State safe haven; disrupting its finance; exposing the organisation’s true nature; and blocking the flow of foreign fighters) with only scattered attention to the support of effective governance in Iraq. In this country (as well as in Syria), stabilization efforts have almost been emptied of their civilian component, confirming that the US has largely turned away from any form of statebuilding (Cordesman 2017). As the US limits itself to military and humanitarian assistance, there remain doubts about whether it can have an impact beyond counterterrorism and towards counterinsurgency and conflict management.

Overall, in the *Global Coalition’s* strategy stabilization is an afterthought within the counterterrorist focus, rather than an approach in itself. In the “clear-hold-build” continuum it stands between ‘clear’ and ‘hold’. As the Islamic State was driven out of Iraq in late 2017, stabilization efforts were included to prevent its return. The *Global Coalition* set up a Working Group on Stabilization co-chaired by Germany and the United Arab Emirates, which has been operating in two areas: training Iraqi police and explosive hazard management (Global Coalition, 2017). This working group has also partnered with UNDP on other stabilization efforts, but overall the Global Coalition’s stabilization activities were not fully coordinated with the UNDP stabilization programme. While coalition members were represented in the Steering Committee of the UNDP facilities and UNDP representatives attended Coalition meetings, there was no formal relationship between the Working Group on Stabilization inside the Global Coalition and UNDP (Lang and al Wari, 2016: 7, 8). Leadership on matters related to stabilization is exercised by the UN Resident Coordination and Humanitarian Coordination for Iraq. The military and civilian coordination of stabilization is by and large limited to sharing information and raising money from the Global Coalition’s partners to the UNDP’s initiative and does not extend to the programmatic level.

In all, the Iraqi quagmire, it seems, is so complex that Western interests are better served from a distance through a counterterrorist approach that does not require the same political commitment of counterinsurgency and statebuilding. The latter are left to local actors. Winning the

hearts and minds of the local population as well as building a strong and representative government are no longer among the top priorities of external actors. Overall, stabilization sits uneasily between counterterrorism and counterinsurgency as it is supposed to stop terrorist groups from returning and to prepare the ground for the consolidation of state authority.

## **b) Abandoning transformative objectives**

In parallel to accusations of Saddam Hussein's support to terrorism, the ambition of spreading democracy, freedom and prosperity also framed the 2003 intervention in Iraq. The occupiers' optimistic expectations about the possibility of exporting Western institutions and values reflected the celebratory mood of the early 2000s, when the military and political supremacy of the West was almost unchallenged. A speech by the then US President George W. Bush at the 20th Anniversary of the National Endowment for Democracy in 2003 illustrates the ethos of the Iraqi endeavour, and it is worth quoting at some length:

Iraqi democracy will succeed — and that success will send forth the news, from Damascus to Teheran — that freedom can be the future of every nation. The establishment of a free Iraq at the heart of the Middle East will be a watershed event in the global democratic revolution. Sixty years of Western nations excusing and accommodating the lack of freedom in the Middle East did nothing to make us safe — because in the long run, *stability cannot be purchased at the expense of liberty* (emphasis added) [...] Therefore, the United States has adopted a new policy, a forward strategy of freedom in the Middle East. This strategy requires the same persistence and energy and idealism we have shown before. And it will yield the same results. As in Europe, as in Asia, as in every region of the world, the advance of freedom leads to peace. The advance of freedom is the calling of our time; it is the calling of our country (Bush, 2003).

Such a call rejected the status quo in Iraq and the broader Middle East in the name of a revolution sustained by idealism and ambition—the outcome of Western hubris rather than of a careful assessment of the reality on the ground. Iraq was the epicentre of international concern, seen not in isolation, but as a piece in the broader regional chessboard. In 2003 the European Union published its first ever security strategy, where it laid out its aspiration of acting as a 'force for good' and, with relation to the Middle East, it mentioned the need for a 'broader engagement with the Arab World.' In 2004 the US proposed to the G-8 countries the Greater Middle East Initiative (GMEI), a regional scheme centred on the promotion of freedom, democracy and prosperity. Even though GMEI created skepticism in Europe for "choosing reform over stability" (Lugar 2004, 5), European institutions nonetheless endorsed broad reformist calls in their approach towards the region. In the

2004 the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) and the EU Strategic Partnership with the Mediterranean and the Middle East called for “the development, through partnership, of a common zone of peace, prosperity and progress in the Mediterranean and the Middle East” (European Council, 2004: 7).

Such a transformational drive no longer represents the international stance towards the MENA region, including Iraq. On the contrary, the international community has made it increasingly clear that stability may be pursued at the expense of democracy and the expansion of liberty. Since the late 2000s, ambitious objectives have been amended downward. At the European level, the ENP was revised in 2011, following the events of the so-called Arab Spring, and later on in November 2015 to take into account the radical changes in the region. The 2015 revision embraced stabilization as the main political priority of the ENP, recognising that “the EU cannot alone solve the many challenges of the region, and there are limits to its leverage.” In addition, while the revised ENP still maintains long-term objectives, it clarifies that “in the next three to five years, the most urgent challenge in many parts of the neighborhood is stabilization” (European Commission, 2015: 2). The idealism of Bush’s speech and the ambitious vision proposed by the 2003 European Security Strategy have given way to the principled pragmatism and, above all, resilience, expressed in the 2016 European Global Strategy that renounces the “grandiose plans about transformation of the region” (Soler i Lecha and Tocci 2016, 4). While in 2003 the desired outcome of the intervention in Iraq involved democratic governance, economic prosperity, peace and order (both in Iraq and at the regional level), fifteen years later European actors and its allies have embraced resilience as their new objective, understood as the capacity of systems and structures to resist shocks and disasters, either by changing the nature of risks before they inflict their damage or by recovering quickly from calamitous events – or both (European Union 2016; Juncos 2017).

The slogan “forget about reforms, focus on ISIS” (Atlantic Council, 2017: 4) reflects such a pragmatic turn. In the post-2014 stabilization agenda a transformational aspiration is virtually absent while resilience has gained the upper hand. For instance, the activities of the UNDP stabilization programme are organized within four primary areas of engagement: public works and infrastructure rehabilitation; livelihoods activities; technical capacity building for local governments, and community reconciliation with the stated outcome of strengthening “government and communities’ resilience to disasters (man-made and natural)” (UNDP, 2016). None of these areas have a reformist ethos; rather, they all operate on a restorative logic. The distribution of funding between these areas shows that the priority is the improvement of basic services for the population,

including water, electricity, and health services (Lang and Al Wari, 2016: 12). This is coherent with the logic of resilience, involving the strengthening of individual, organizational and structural resources in order to anticipate or endure shocks, and to rebuild when necessary. It also serves to establish “a set of conditions the local populace regards as legitimate, acceptable, and predictable,” as found in standard understandings of stabilization (US DoA, 2014: iv). The focus on internal capacities and capabilities suggests the need to ‘cope with’ or ‘manage’ conflict, rather than transform it or solve it (Chandler, 2012). In other words, a resilient country may be fragile and not particularly democratic, free or prosperous, but is at least able to handle its predicament with little or no external involvement and without exporting instability to its neighbors.

Evidence that the ambitious objectives of the early 2000s have been revised downward can be derived also from the overall architecture that supports stabilization. Whether framed within the *Global Coalition Against Daesh* or the UNDP-run stabilization programme, there is no clear country leadership behind stabilization. As mentioned, the US does not even cite “stabilization” in its strategy to counter the Islamic State (The White House, 2014). The US as well as its European counterparts appear to be reluctant to engage extensively in a country where past initiatives have led to few clear achievements (Lang and Al Wari, 2016). This is reflected in relatively low operational budgets, which the UNDP reports at around USD 370 million as of 30 June 2017 (UNDP, 2017). More strikingly, at a donor conference held in Kuwait in February 2018, Iraq was promised only around USD 30 billion, a fraction of the USD 88 billion to USD 100 billion that the Iraqi Government has estimated as necessary for the reconstruction of the areas liberated from the Islamic State (Coker, 2018). The majority of the promised funding was made available in loans rather than direct aid, and thus its disbursement depends on the activation of the investment projects as well as on the solidity of the Iraqi financial situation.

### **c) Lowering performance standards**

The abandonment of transformative objectives and the rise of stabilization have led to lowering performance standards. During the initial post-2003 statebuilding intervention achieving stability was interpreted as resulting from the ideologically driven transformation of the political, economic and social order in the country (Dodge, 2010). Accordingly, international efforts targeted almost all aspects of political, economic and social life: through a bottom-up (e.g., the Provincial Reconstruction Team) or a top-down approach (e.g., the Coalition Provisional Authority or the

influence exercised on the Iraqi Constitution) they aspired to transform civil society, media, the private sector, economic laws and regulation, elections, governance, the security sector and more—regardless of their inner contradictions and poor implementation (SIGIR, 2013). In the current phase, what prevails instead is an interpretation of stability as a pre-requisite for an eventual transformation, no longer under the auspices of international actors: stability is not the result of an overall transformation involving the establishment of democratic institutions, a market economy, and respect for human rights, but rather the precondition to it. In practice, this understanding overlooks structural deficiencies in the country to focus on quick fixes delinked from a broader strategic approach.

Pragmatism and speed prevail over other considerations. As a UNDP (Iraq) representative explains,

if a school is totally destroyed and needs full reconstruction, which will need millions of dollars and will take three to five years, then we won't probably do that project. However, if a school has suffered cosmetic damages, and can be up and running in a couple of months, it requires couple hundreds thousands dollar to fix it, put the books back in the school, and get the children back to school, then it's something that we do under stabilization.<sup>6</sup>

The main objective is to support the delivery of basic services and the maintenance of security when national authorities do not yet possess the legitimacy and/or the resources to exercise effective control over their territory or to provide basic services (De Coning, Aoi, Karlsrud, 2017).

Lower standards are found not only in the scale of implemented projects but also in their expected outcomes. The UNDP Stabilization Programme has set the return of IDPs to areas liberated from the Islamic State as its main performance criterion (UNDP, 2016: 14). Contrary to standard realist worldviews (Kaufmann, 1996), the return and re-mixing of the population does not increase the possibility of violence, but rather diminishes it. The demographic changes in Baghdad in the period 2006-08 exemplified, for instance, the mutually reinforcing logic of identity separation and violence. Thus, the UNDP support to IDP return is appropriate to further 'stability', however understood, but the UNDP's approach overlooks the political, security and economic context in which the return of IDPs occurs, above all the political nature of many of the obstacles faced by IDPs in returning to their homes, including the presence of a divided governance structure prone to

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<sup>6</sup> Skype interview with UNDP representative, 30 November 2016.

corruption and bureaucratic mismanagement.<sup>7</sup> The influence of corruption in Iraq has been so pervasive and corrosive that Stuart Bowen, the US Special Inspector General for Iraq Reconstruction referred to it as the “second insurgency” (cited in Al-Ali, 2014: 189). The UNDP’s approach is indicative of a framework that has sidelined and/or postponed any consideration of governance issues in a moment in which Iraqi citizens have a very low confidence for their state institutions: as of March 2018, of the 1066 people interviewed for a public opinion survey, about 90 per cent expressed no or low confidence towards political parties and the parliament. Central and local governments perform slightly better, but remain largely untrusted by the population (Iraqi Thoughts, 2018).

The lower performance standards were purposefully set by international interveners. The first UNDP-led and run Funding Facility for Immediate Stabilization (FFIS) was based on the (rather unrealistic) working assumption that “stabilisation would be followed by reconstruction by the Government using public revenues, as soon as FFIS left a city or district” (UNDP, 2016: 10). As these conditions did not materialize, UNDP launched a second Funding Facility for Extensive Stabilization to finance medium-term projects that could solidify the military victories in the areas liberated from the Islamic State and still awaiting for the process of reconstruction to begin. Similarly, the UN’s two years Reconciliation and Resilience programme aims at “fast track[ing] the social dimensions of reconstruction” in what is defined as a *nexus* framework, that is, a framework linking humanitarian assistance with stabilization (UN, 2018). These stabilization programmes assumed that once ‘stability’ of a kind is achieved, the government of Iraq will intervene and invest in long-term projects. Underlying this approach is the assumption that problems of conflict, governance and poverty are no longer thought to be amenable to external interventionist solutions. Accordingly, outside actors must rely on facilitating the local authorities’ development of existing capacities (Chandler, 2012). The emphasis is not on the implementation of external frameworks, as in the early phase of international intervention in Iraq, but on instrumentally facilitating the agency and empowerment of local actors. Stabilization does not “fix failed states”; rather, it aims at supporting society in restoring and developing an effective political order and the capacities to withstand external shocks (Rotmann, 2016).

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<sup>7</sup> Interview with IDPs residing in the three governorates of Erbil, Dohuk and Suleymaniyyah, June-July 2017. See also: Costantini and Palani 2018.

As a result, stabilization serves to distinguish between international and local actors' responsibilities, and between short-term and long-term objectives. As Brett McGurk, Special Presidential Envoy for the *Global Coalition Against Daesh*, states:

We are committed to stabilization [...] This is not reconstruction; it's not nation building. Stabilization is demining. That means setting the conditions for people to return to their homes. [...] It means basic electricity, sewage, water, the basic essentials to allow populations to come back to their home. And we have found [...] that this focus on the basic elements of stabilization is a critical enabler for allowing people to come back to their home – to their homes. Now, sometimes we meet with local councils and they say, "We really want you, the United States, to help us with the – you're going to run the hospitals, aren't you? You're going to run our school system." And no, we're not – we're not doing that. We've learned some lessons and we're not very good at that, and also that is not our responsibility. We will do basic stabilization (McGurk 2017).

As this quote suggests, while stabilization requires international support, and is needed to allow international actors to withdraw, reconstruction is expected to be led and run by Iraqi authorities. An underlying objective is thus to "imbue national government and local authorities with greater legitimacy in the eyes of the governed" to embark on much needed reconstruction (Lang and al Wari, 2016: 4).

Although legitimacy can be considered as a sign of success of stabilization operations, it is difficult to identify quantifiable indicators showing that it "works". The attribution of causality to stabilization programs in volatile, political and socially complex environments is challenging (Gordon, 2010: 384). The difficulty of identifying causal mechanisms is a fundamental reason both making grand transformational schemes impossible to achieve and counselling the adoption of more modest intervention objectives focused on resilience. Accordingly, the benchmark of success for stabilization missions is frequently a much limited "prevention and reduction of net harm to people and polities" (Zyck and Muggah, 2015: 4). From the perspective of international interveners, this benchmark is sufficient to disengage from countries such as Iraq.

Even though stabilization has more limited objectives than liberal statebuilding and counterinsurgency, it is not necessarily more likely to achieve its goals because of the predictable difficulties likely to emerge on the ground. The definitive defeat of the Islamic State will entail more than military, counterterrorist actions. It will require a renewed effort at tackling governance deficiencies in the country, including corruption, fraud and mismanagement in addition to inter- and intra-groups grievances (Atlantic Council, 2017). Unfortunately, the Iraqi government may not



be able to assume upon itself the full responsibility of ensuring long-term forms of democratic accountability, economic development and social peace. Politically, the government has to achieve a difficult balance between the requests and pressures from domestic and international constituencies, while ensuring an equal treatment to all its citizens. Economically, the current financial capacity of the government cannot sustain the tremendous costs of reconstruction. Vaguely defined stabilization does not take into consideration these limitations. Rather, it offers international actors a middle ground between inaction and large-scale intervention potentially leading to another large, expensive and politically unsustainable mission. This characteristic of stabilization, and its internal contradictions, do not imply any nostalgia for earlier large-scale intervention. Rather, they counsel against facile enthusiasm about this new phase of external involvement in Iraq.

## **Conclusions**

The study of the evolution of intervention in Iraq since 2003 onwards reveals a dramatic change in the international approach to weak and fragile states. Stabilisation differs from liberal statebuilding as it no longer has democracy and a market economy as its objectives. In addition, it differs from counterinsurgency inasmuch as the goal of providing services to the people, primarily security, is no longer in the hands of international actors, but rather of local ones. Ambitious transformative agendas have been side-lined in favour of a more modest, less intrusive style. In practice, the new approach entails an involvement of international actors limited to military tasks and a poorly coordinated interaction between military and civilian components of stabilization missions. Stabilization focuses on quick-fixing and pragmatic solutions (i.e., rehabilitation of infrastructure) aiming at buying time to enable local actors to take responsibility for reconstruction and the future development of the country. The abandonment of transformative narratives and goals and the lowering of standards of success show that while previous interventions considered stability as emerging from the presence of democratic practices and values, the new agenda considers stability as the pre-condition for the attainment of other institutional and normative objectives. In short, stabilization stands in between 'clear' and 'hold' and leaves the 'build' (reconstruction, governance, development) to local authorities. A 'security' driver is also evident in stabilising Iraq and it reflects international actors' concerns about the interdependence of external security threat and national security.

Within a changed geopolitical order, the development of stabilization programmes in Iraq represents a reaction to the widely perceived failure of previous liberal intervention blueprints. The Iraqi case shows that stabilization acts as a filler: between counterterrorism and counterinsurgency; between security requirements and reconstruction objectives; between external missions and domestic responsibilities. As such, it rests on a contradiction: while it refrains from an assessment of fragility, it presupposes a state authority capable and willing of exerting a positive agency. This is a quite unrealistic assumption both in Iraq and in many of the other contexts where stabilization is deployed. This contradiction raises questions about the sustainability of stabilization. It is possible that technological developments will make warfare from a distance ever more effective, thus contributing to successful counterterrorism and, at least in part, counterinsurgency. It is also conceivable that Iraqi authorities, under pressure from international donors, will be able to lead a reconstruction programme while minimizing (inevitable) forms of corruption and mismanagement. However, without the development of inclusive forms of governance, and respect for the rights of individuals and groups, those grievances that motivated the downturn spiral of violence since 2003 are unlikely to go away. If, as this paper has shown, stabilization is the response to the unresolved issues in Iraq, it may not be a solution to them.

Table 1. International Approaches to Stabilization in Iraq

ACTOR	STABILIZATION	MILITARY ACTION	GOVERNANCE	PEACE OPERATION	RECONSTRUCTION
Global Coalition Against Daesh	No definition  Occurring in the immediate aftermath of a military victory and to sustain it, stabilization aims at preventing the return of the Islamic State or similar groups	Stabilization is a component of a larger mostly military operation framed as a counterterrorism operation	Almost no mention to governance and limited to security  (i.e., police training)	No mention	First step towards reconstruction
UNDP (Iraq)	No definition.  Stabilization helps “restore confidence in the leading role of the Government ... and give population a sense of progress” <sup>8</sup>	A fully civilian mandate with little coordination with the military operation and operating in the immediate aftermath of military victories	Local governments  Boosting the immediate response capacity of local governments to cope with the challenges arising during stabilization  (i.e., capacity building)	Stabilization has a social cohesion track targeted at the community levels	Stabilization entails early recovery efforts to be followed by “reconstruction by the Government using public revenues” (UNDP 2016)  (i.e., public work and infrastructure rehabilitation; livelihoods activities)

<sup>8</sup> UNDP website, available at: <http://www.iq.undp.org/content/iraq/en/home/ourwork/Stabilisation/In-depth/>

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