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Post-ISIS Challenges for Stabilization: Iraq, Syria and the U.S. Approach

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Executive Summary

By Jonas Parello-Plesner, Senior Fellow, Hudson Institute

The fight in Iraq and Syria against the brutal terrorist organization Islamic State (ISIS) has been led by an unprecedented international coalition, with the U.S. as the galvanizing diplomatic and military component. ISIS was defeated militarily in Iraq at the end of last year, but even today small pockets remain as a fighting force in Syria.

As the war is won, peace must be secured. Key to that effort is post-conflict stabilization through restoration of essential services and a gradual return of governance. As the U.S. National Security Strategy puts it, “instability and weak governance threaten U.S. interests.” In Iraq and Syria, reasserting stability is vital so that terrorist organizations do not find fertile ground again.

This report draws some lessons from Iraq and Syria on stabilization efforts and the path forward. The backdrop is the evolving U.S. approach to stabilization under the Trump administration. On June 19, 2018, the administration published the final version of the Stabilization Assistance Review report, which provides an inter-agency definition of stabilization, including a more hard-nosed approach to sharing the burden with partners in accordance with President Trump’s priorities. The review also draws demarcation lines between humanitarian assistance, stabilization, and reconstruction. Stabilization is short-term and transitional, and thus also limits the time frame for U.S. engagement. However, the U.S. no longer provides public funding for reconstruction to avoid nation-building, which the administration has declared to be off limits.

In Iraq, initial post-conflict stabilization was relatively successful. The UN, led by the United Nations Assistance Mission for Iraq (UNAMI), directed the efforts in tight coordination with the anti-ISIS coalition. The coalition’s military efforts in Mosul were adjusted to identify how many internally displaced persons (IDPs) could be accommodated in a day, which was typically no more than 10,000.¹ Another way of measuring UNAMI’s stabilization accomplishment is in the rate of return of displaced persons, which has been relatively high, with over 3.2 million by the start of 2018. UNAMI also managed to successfully pool donor resources through the Funding Facility for Stabilization (FFS), which employs local workers and thus provides community growth as well.

Yet even though post-conflict stabilization is still taking place in Iraq, the next phases loom. Stabilization is generally a bridge to longer-term political reconstruction and reconciliation. The “by, with, and through” approach of the anti-ISIS coalition created the foundation for an Iraqi-owned victory over Da’esh. The resulting local pride and unity can at best serve as a new foundation for reconstructing and reconciling Iraq.

At worst, the many divisions in Iraq—from the political exclusion of Sunnis, which helped give rise to ISIS in Iraq, to the restoration of the minorities of the Nineveh plains, who face enduring challenges—will recreate fault lines. The U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) is now dispersing assistance directly to these groups, including Christians, to restore communities. Moreover, the situation in Iraqi Kurdistan is equally tense, requiring sustainable compromises. Kirkuk, the disputed city, is one priority within the Kurdish question, particularly given that the Iraqi constitution envisions a governance process for the city. For the U.S., the level of continuing Iranian influence is likely to affect the U.S. engagement and conversely affect how willing the Iraqi government will be to continue security cooperation with the U.S. including accepting U.S. soldiers on Iraqi soil.

The Iraqi government has moved into the reconstruction phase through the Kuwait Reconstruction Conference for Iraq, held in February 2018, at which the U.S. administration's novel approach to burden-sharing was put into practice.² The U.S. did not provide public money for Iraqis and instead nudged other countries to contribute more, including European and Gulf partners. Still, the U.S. has continued generous contributions to humanitarian aid and stabilization.

For donor countries to sustain influence, reconstruction funding should be tied to government reforms and, more importantly, to tangible progress on reconciliation and political accommodation efforts.

In Syria, post-conflict stabilization has been political and fraught from its inception, since the U.S. and its anti-ISIS coalition partners do not want to engage and work with Bashar al-Assad's central government. The same approach of “by, with, and through” has been applied—but in Syria there have been greater challenges. This is because the local partner of necessity, the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), is closely tied to the Syrian Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG), a group that Turkey perceives as a direct extension of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), which is listed as a terrorist organization. For the U.S. and other Western allies, military and stabilization collaboration with the SDF in Raqqa has complicated relations with Turkey. The dynamic has also contributed to Turkey's own incursion into Afrin, as it establishes its version of “stabilization” in these areas.

On the other hand, for the U.S., it was the 2016 defeat of ISIS in Manbij, where no post-conflict stabilization plan had been drawn up, which prompted stabilization preparation for Raqqa and the surrounding areas. Prior to Raqqa's downfall, State Department and USAID officials set up camp near Tabqa and tested nimble, small-scale operations to prepare for restoration of essential services and mine clearing.

There is no doubt about the necessity of post-conflict stabilization in Raqqa. The city was symbolically important for ISIS as its capital. Therefore, it is equally symbolically important to render Raqqa stable enough for refugees and IDPs to return and for the city

not to become a breeding ground or refuge for extremism again. Around 100,000 people have returned to Raqqa, but ongoing demining and the lack of essential services continue to make conditions perilous. The question is whether political will can last long enough to sustain stabilization funding, and whether partners can step up to improve the burden-sharing as the U.S. continues its pivot away from reconstruction (and partly from stabilization).

Additionally, stabilization is intrinsically linked to the broader question of political transition and governance, which remains unresolved in Syria. It was part of then Secretary of State Rex Tillerson's Syria strategy in January to combine these priorities. The fact that forces friendly to the U.S. hold up to 30 percent of Syria's territory was seen as leverage for political talks. This approach seems more uncertain now with Trump's April announcement of a U.S. military withdrawal from Syria, even if it is not carried out immediately, combined with his focus on working with Russia in Syria, which seems uninterested in any genuine political transition. Russia's lack of commitment to the southwest de-escalation zone, even though agreed between Trump and President Putin, seems a good litmus test of how much—or little—the U.S. can get out of cooperating with Russia in Syria. The Trump-Putin summit in Helsinki was also vague on specifics regarding Syria.

The press release for the Stabilization Assistance Review report specifically highlights “aligning stabilization efforts toward supporting defined political outcomes.”³ Thus, stabilization efforts in Raqqa might not be sustainable if divorced from a larger political and diplomatic strategy.

Another major challenge for stabilization in Raqqa is Kurdish military and civilian dominance through the SDF and the Raqqa Civilian Council (RCC), which creates the potential for conflict with the majority Sunni Arab local population. There are already reports of such local clashes. One way to mitigate conflict would be to hold local elections to guarantee better inclusion of Sunnis. The U.S. could also encourage the Syrian Kurds to devolve authority to Arabs and local tribes. These measures could gradually reduce the geographical expanse of Kurdish-controlled territory. In addition, they could potentially prevent the YPG from using the future status of Raqqa as a bargaining chip in negotiations with the Assad regime and Russia. Pursuing such a strategy would obviously present a new challenge for the U.S. in getting Kurdish buy-in.

Simultaneously, and more broadly, the U.S. and other anti-ISIS coalition partners could engage the Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD) and its armed wing, the YPG, on changing the party's structure and irreversibly severing links with the PKK, thus creating long-term options for reconciliation between Turkey and these groups of Syrian Kurds. Turkish by now well-established relations with the Iraqi Kurds (the Kurdistan Regional Government, or KRG) demonstrate that enmity between Turks and Kurds is not inevitable.

All such moves demand a certain element of predictability and U.S. staying power. It was somewhat surprising, then, that President Trump announced in April that the U.S. military should depart Syria. That decision has been put on hold, particularly since the military fight against ISIS is not over. A hasty U.S. withdrawal would make it very difficult to achieve aims associated with stabilization.

Trump froze a portion of stabilization funding for Syria, perceiving it as nation-building, which he deems unnecessary and believes that other countries should pay for. Ultimately, this makes it harder to get the displaced back into their homes.

In conclusion, in both Iraq and Syria, post-conflict stabilization has continued to be part of the U.S. policy response. The report of the Stabilization Assistance Review codifies this through a narrower approach to stabilization and acknowledges that there is “no appetite to repeat large-scale reconstruction efforts.” Yet it also states that stabilization is inherently political.

This is evident in Iraq, where successful stabilization still must show that it can translate into successful reconciliation and reconstruction, considering regional and national political dynamics.

This is evident in Syria, where the end state of the country emerging from war is still uncertain, making it hard to know if stabilization will translate into long-term advances.

And it is evident inside the U.S. administration, where President Trump’s willingness to go a step further and freeze stabilization funding in Syria calls into question the framework and distinctions that the review was erecting as U.S. policy.

Post-Conflict Stabilization in Iraq⁴

Iraq has militarily defeated the terrorist organization ISIS. This is the good news, which was also underlined at the meeting of the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS, held in Kuwait on February 13, 2018, in conjunction with the Kuwait Reconstruction Conference for Iraq.

Yet the task ahead is as daunting as any military campaign. Now Iraq needs to rebuild and to heal its communities to foster an inclusive national identity. Challenges remain, from funding of continuing stabilization efforts to the even larger resources needed for reconstruction over the coming years.

According to announcements made at the reconstruction conference, donors have pledged a decent sum, around \$30 billion, although the Iraqi government touted \$88 billion as the desired amount. The Gulf countries and Turkey are becoming new large donors. The private sector has also showed significant interest, although corruption is still a major concern, which the Iraqi government seeks to address.

Continued stabilization is making it possible and desirable for internally displaced persons (IDPs) to return to their homes. Over 3 million Iraqis have returned, but more await in camps or temporary accommodations.

Equally important is reconciliation. The UN is working with the Iraqi government to implement this at the national level. Baghdad and Erbil should pursue continued dialogue and concrete steps forward, including on the thorny issue of Kirkuk, in accordance with the Iraqi Constitution. Inclusiveness for Sunnis is important, both during reconstruction and before and after elections, as their disenfranchisement helped produce fertile soil for ISIS. Yet reconciliation should not be only top-down, and local community efforts undertaken by Iraqi civil society organizations are essential. Reconstruction funding should be tied to government reforms and more importantly, to tangible progress on reconciliation and political accommodation efforts.

A novel aspect of the conference was the U.S. administration's new approach to burden-sharing in the aftermath of the ISIS presence in Iraq. President Trump wants to build infrastructure at home and has tweeted dismissively about the \$7 trillion the U.S. has already spent in the Middle East. The United States will not disburse public funding for reconstruction, which it sees as nation-building, although it remains among the top contributors to humanitarian and stabilization assistance and will provide loans to private companies. Yet even such investments could pose additional risk for American companies because of sanctions against Iran, whose economic presence is felt in several important sectors.

Instead, the U.S. encouraged international institutions and others to step up, and Saudi Arabia, for example, contributed \$1.5 billion. Leading up to the conference, the U.S. facilitated a diplomatic reconciliation process between Iraq and Saudi Arabia for outstanding debts to Riyadh.

From Stabilization to Reconstruction: A Huge Task Ahead

By the time Prime Minister Haider al Abadi declared victory in Mosul in July 2017, the campaign to retake the city from ISIS had been going on since October 2016. Structural damage was, and remains, extensive—both from ISIS and from the airstrike-heavy battle to defeat ISIS.

This damage to Mosul was catastrophic, and the cost and effort required for stabilization are more extensive than many initially anticipated.⁵ Early cost estimates for Mosul alone (primarily the western half of the city) are more than \$1 billion dollars for rebuilding basic infrastructure.⁶

But Mosul is just one territory (albeit a significant one) in a series of places across seven provinces liberated from ISIS. Following Mosul, the counter-ISIS campaign continued to cities remaining under terrorist control, including Hawija and Tal Afar, and smaller towns in between. The cost of direct damage is estimated by the World Bank and the Iraqi government to be \$45.7 billion; the total price to rebuild from the conflict will be more than \$88 billion. In the short term, \$23 billion is needed for basic stabilization and rebuilding, with \$65 billion needed over the medium term.⁷

IDPs Return, but Many Remain

Funding for stabilization and reconstruction is essential not only to Iraq's recovery broadly, but particularly to aid those displaced and those wishing to return. December 2017 figures indicate that 3.2 million displaced Iraqis who escaped the conflict have returned to their homes, while 2.6 million remain displaced.⁸ At the time of victory in Mosul, nearly 700,000 west Mosul residents were still displaced.⁹ The pace of return has been slow due to the destruction of homes and basic infrastructure and the cessation of essential public services. Remaining IEDs (improvised explosive devices), including those hidden by ISIS prior to its retreat,¹⁰ as well as ERW (explosive remnants of war) continue to make civilian areas unsafe and add to mounting casualties for those who do attempt to return.¹¹

The return of IDPs is further complicated by factors such as tribal tensions (pre-existing, and exacerbated during the ISIS conflict) and multiple military forces: Iraqi security forces, Iranian-linked Hash'd al Shaabi militias, Kurdish Peshmerga, and coalition forces. These may stoke community divisions, introduce formal or informal obstacles to returning, or ignite fear (justified or unjustified) and keep IDPs from returning. Physical destruction, insecurity (such as fear of reprisals, including along sectarian lines), limited

basic service delivery, and/or poor economic opportunities may also prolong displacement.

Is Funding for Reconstruction Sufficient?

Iraq cannot repay the \$88 billion cost of rebuilding the country on its own. Ongoing stabilization efforts still need additional funding before the Herculean task of reconstruction is begun. The United States, which has had a lengthy presence in Iraq and has taken the lead in supporting Iraqi forces in the battle against ISIS, has clearly stated that it does not wish to provide public funding for reconstruction, which it sees as nation-building.¹²

Instead, it has launched efforts to garner reconstruction support from allies, among them NATO countries, the Gulf states, and the private sector (including 2,300 companies that attended the Kuwait donor conference, discussed below). It has placed a particular emphasis on Saudi Arabia and facilitated Saudi-Iraqi discussions and a thaw after years of cool diplomatic relations.¹³ Saudi Arabia also has a strategic regional interest in solidifying its influence. The Saudis announced publicly that they support a “united nonsectarian Iraq,” meaning an Iraq where Iran does not dominate the political scene.¹⁴ Yet the Saudis will now use a new tool, reconstruction funding, to gain influence over Iraq’s future trajectory.

The World Bank also stepped in during fall 2017, approving \$400 million for recovery and reconstruction of priority infrastructure for service delivery in Mosul and other recently liberated areas. This was in addition to the \$350 million dispersed earlier for emergency development funding.¹⁵ February 2018 saw the bank approve \$300 million for the Social Fund for Development (SFD) in Iraq, aimed at reducing poverty more broadly across the country but affecting areas from which ISIS had been removed. As of mid-February, the World Bank had committed \$4.7 billion for various reconstruction and recovery programs in Iraq.¹⁶

UN efforts in Iraq have also been multifold. The UN Assistance Mission to Iraq (UNAMI) has served as the central point of UN engagement in the country and has led on issuing a UN funding request of \$482 million for the first year of the Iraq Recovery and Resilience Programme (RRP) in February 2017.¹⁷ The UN Development Programme (UNDP) in Iraq houses the Funding Facility for Stabilization (FFS), which in the weeks leading up to the donor conference in Kuwait received contributions of \$75 million from USAID, \$58.96 million from the European Union, \$21.4 million from Denmark, and \$12 million from Sweden.¹⁸ With the involvement of other UN agencies, including the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the World Health Organization (WHO), the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), and the International Organization for Migration (IOM), along with international and national nongovernmental organizations (I/NGOs), proliferation of efforts is clear, and duplication of efforts is a risk.

Mixed Results from the February 2018 Iraq Reconstruction Conference

The February 2018 conference on rebuilding Iraq saw donor countries, the private sector, and international financial institutions convene to discuss financing for the post-ISIS reconstruction phase. The conference highlighted priorities shared by the international community and the Iraqi government and downplayed differences.

The conference had two themes: one, an Iraq in need of deep healing and two, a very positive post-ISIS united Iraq ready for investment and ready to play a key role in the region. The “united Iraq” narrative does not yet fully correspond to the situation on the ground.

UNAMI and other NGOs emphasized the humanitarian and reconstruction needs in Sunni areas ravaged by ISIS and by military operations to liberate ISIS-controlled areas, while Dr. Sami al-Araji, chairman of the Iraqi government’s National Investment Commission (NIC), promoted a post-ISIS “high risk, high reward” investment opportunity in Iraq’s oil, telecommunications, transportation, manufacturing, and construction sectors—the same sectors where Iran is playing.

The Iraqi government may believe it has successfully outsourced reconstruction in Sunni areas to UNAMI, UNDP, and other NGO funding sources, and that it can focus its resources elsewhere. Yet such a strategy can also play into local and sectarian politics. For example, during the conference, Marwan al-Jibara, a spokesman for the Council of Tribal Sheikhs in Salahuddin Province, told the *New York Times* that in terms of the number of projects planned in their area, “we are sorely underrepresented.”¹⁹

The UN is working with the Iraqi government to implement reconciliation at the national level through the Iraqi National Reconciliation Commission. However, at the reconstruction conference there was little to no talk of conditioning international investment on Baghdad’s willingness to promote reconciliation and political accommodation with its disenfranchised Sunni Arab and Kurdish populations.

The question of funding is not simply whether buildings will be rebuilt and homes will once again be inhabitable. Funding for rebuilding is essential for the country to maintain stability moving forward. Baghdad’s position is that if there is investment in post-ISIS Iraq, stability will result. Given that donor funds are not tied to reconciliation initiatives and political inclusion by Baghdad, however, there seems to be little emphasis on fixing what led to the rise of ISIS to begin with: disenfranchised Sunnis distrustful of Baghdad.

Tangible initiatives toward reconciliation and political accommodation are critical pillars in holding on to gains against ISIS and ensuring that the organization does not reemerge. Furthermore, amid deep-rooted divisions in the country, there is a growing wave of anti-Iranian fervor in the Sunni areas that will require reconciliation, if not a shift in strategic and regional relations to counter Iranian influence.

Reconciliation: Ensuring against an ISIS Resurgence

Should the intent and early efforts to stabilize and rebuild Iraq fail or fall short, ISIS could just as easily resurrect itself as it did prior to 2014, when it emerged from al Qaeda's remnants. Iraq itself—specifically Mosul—was the stage for Abu Bakr al Baghdadi's announcement of his attempt at a caliphate. Iraq remains vulnerable to the threat that ISIS will go underground before resurging.

Reconciliation in the counter-ISIS context will need to address sectarian divisions, ethnic divisions, tribal divisions, and other causes of community tensions. For example, the Shia may be wary or mistrusting of Sunnis, whom they may associate with the rise of ISIS and its atrocities. Liberated populations more broadly may hold grievances against the non-local Shia forces who liberated Sunni areas, specifically where they abused their positions in doing so, particularly where ethno-sectarianism was rampant.²⁰ Tribal relations may be strained or there may be a risk of reprisals between tribes, while ethnic minorities, such as the wronged Yazidis and Christians, could harbor grievances and mistrust toward Sunnis or Arabs more generally.

There are reconciliation efforts underway. UNAMI, for example, is training women in preparation for national reconciliation negotiations²¹ and reconciliation-focused meetings, including in the Najaf governorate.²² Other UN agencies are also involved, such as IOM, with its program on community policing,²³ and UNESCO, the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization, which in partnership with France, is promoting reconciliation efforts through community media.²⁴ Another example is the United States Institute for Peace (USIP), which is supporting Iraqi-led community dialogues in areas such as Mosul, Tal Afar, Tikrit, Hawija, and Nineveh.²⁵ In early 2017, UNDP helped set up Support for Integrated Reconciliation in Iraq (SIRI). This project focused in part on locally led reconciliation committees, support to victims of violence (including women), and efforts to increase public awareness of civic participation in political processes and engage with minorities, including youth and women.²⁶ Previously, in February 2017, the World Bank attached some of its funding to reconciliation, arguing that this would ensure the sustainability of reconstruction efforts, and launched a parallel track within the effort to address the social side of recovery efforts.²⁷ The bank's Iraq Country Partnership Framework for 2018-22 was also built on consultations whose priority was partly "rebuilding the social contract and state legitimacy," and which again tied reconciliation aims to broader bank support.²⁸ Iraqi government- and citizen-led efforts are also underway to rebuild the country's social fabric. There are reports, however, of challenges from officials' failure to learn from previous lessons about reconciliation.²⁹

One element of reconciliation is justice for groups that were abused by ISIS or by liberating forces. Rapid trials of suspected ISIS fighters took place in Iraq as territory fell to Iraqi forces. However, there is international anxiety that the trials may not conform with international norms and international law, and in any case, they will not be sufficient

to address ISIS atrocities.³⁰ Justice for minorities, such as the Yazidis, is unlikely to be served with local trials of suspected ISIS fighters and will likely require international proceedings.³¹ The issue comes down to who decides. Sunni military-aged males are often called ISIS “collaborators” and may then meet the same fate as ISIS fighters.³² There are too many examples of sectarian actors in Baghdad’s security apparatus failing to distinguish between a Sunni military-aged male and an ISIS fighter.

Addressing divisions, tensions, grievances, and calls for justice is not just crucial to fortifying retaken areas against an ISIS resurgence, but will also be important following the parliamentary elections. Most Sunni Iraqi voters are emerging from as much as three years of ISIS control, and many live in areas that were ungoverned to begin with. There are Sunni grievances from the Iraq war in the early 2000s that remain unaddressed. Allowing these older grievances to be added to the new grievances could lead to a resurgence of ISIS and the factors that led to its rise several years ago. This reconciliation could also make or break candidates who seek to woo the Sunni electorate to gain an edge, which Shia hardliners will have a harder time acquiring. The Sunnis need more space in the country’s political life and in Iraqi life generally. On the security front, during parliamentary elections, questions will likely arise about the future role of U.S. forces.

Iranian Influence throughout the Iraqi Security and Intelligence Apparatus

The question of Iran’s role in Iraq and relationship to it is central not just to reconciliation, but to the parliamentary elections more broadly. For the U.S. administration, reducing Iran’s regional footprint is an important component of policy. The Hash’d al Shaabi were a relatively significant part of the force combatting ISIS in Iraq, though with a reduced role at the tail end of the campaign.³³ This militia came together in 2014 when Iraq’s grand ayatollah al Sistani issued a fatwa calling to defend Iraq against ISIS. While not all Hash’d al Shaabi units or troops are loyal to Iran—some are Iraq-aligned Shia units³⁴—Iran’s influence in the command and control structure and the senior ranks is reportedly strong.³⁵

Given that the Hash’d al Shaabi were formed to counter the ISIS threat, which has since been defeated, the question arises whether their units will be demobilized and disbanded. Iran’s influence in the Hash’d al Shaabi militias, which have in part been supported by the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC),³⁶ and the degree to which Iran has cemented that influence, may make disbanding complicated if not unlikely, at least in the near term. As the IRGC Quds Force—the IRGC’s expeditionary terrorist force —seeks to expand and cement its influence in Iraq, the Hash’d al Shaabi may be one of the more pragmatic vehicles for doing so.³⁷

In areas liberated from ISIS, the forces holding the territory should reflect the ethnic makeup of the local population—both to stabilize liberated areas and prevent a resurgence, and to begin to address grievances and avoid future escalations. Questions

about whether security forces, who are 90 percent Shia, will be able to maintain security gains while branding Sunnis as collaborators and further disenfranchising them will undermine reconciliation and recovery and likely lead to “security backslide.” The central government should empower local Sunni forces to defend liberated Sunni-majority areas rather than leaving the task to Shia-dominated Iraqi forces or the Hash’d al Shaabi.³⁸

More broadly, Iran has arguably integrated itself effectively into the fabric of Iraqi politics. Iranian influence beyond militias was a significant factor in the May 2018 elections. Some Iraqi parties are reportedly pursuing a more moderate approach, tempering relations with Iran through a foreign policy reevaluation and engaging the Sunni and other non-Shia minority blocs.

Don’t Leave the Kurdish Question Unanswered

In the aftermath of the unrecognized Kurdish independence referendum in September 2017, Baghdad cut off aid and humanitarian assistance to the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG). This trapped significant IDP populations, as the Kurdish region hosts a significant number of Iraqi IDPs and Syrian refugees, and added to the strain on Kurdish resources. Highlighted at the Kuwait donor conference was Baghdad’s lack of plans to use donor funds in Kurdish areas.

The current return of control over the disputed territories, including Kirkuk, from Kurdish Peshmerga to the Iraqi government does not resolve their permanent status. This needs to be worked out in dialogue, and regarding Kirkuk, in accordance with Iraqi constitutional procedures.

Furthermore, the main issue is addressing the Kurdish share of the federal budget, as Kurds have less direct income from direct oil revenue. The planned oil pipeline from Kirkuk to Turkey could further limit income for the KRG.

For the U.S., the KRG’s future orientation is also to be watched, since disappointment over the lack of international and U.S. support in the independence referendum last year has led to a growing turn toward Iran.

Post-Conflict Stabilization in Syria³⁹

In April, President Trump announced his wish to pull U.S. troops out of Syria, and in conjunction, froze \$200 million in stabilization funds for the country. Though this appeals to his domestic political base and is in keeping with his campaign promises to avoid doling out American taxpayers' money for unnecessary wars and reconstruction in the Middle East, many in his administration and beyond harbor reservations about a too-hasty withdrawal.

First of all, the military job of defeating ISIS is not over. Turkey's incursion from the north has made the endgame harder because many of the Syrian Kurdish SDF fighters, who fought ISIS valiantly, have redeployed there. And in the long run, both U.S. civilian advisors and advisors from allied countries need the U.S. military umbrella to continue stabilization work.

Trump insists that allies and partners should pay more. But the much-touted Saudi-led forces and funding for Syria have not materialized. The UN could gradually do more, but it will need the consent of Bashar al-Assad and of Russia. And although European allies have stepped up contributions, particularly on demining, this will not alleviate the shortfall if the U.S. continues the stabilization freeze.

In Iraq, it seemed that a Trumpian equilibrium had been reached, with a distinction made between stabilization, which is not considered nation-building, and reconstruction, which is. Yet Trump has abandoned that distinction in Syria by freezing stabilization funds, which are also used for demining Raqqa, the former ISIS capital, to make it somewhat safe for refugees to return.

Stabilization in Syria is not only a necessity for returning refugees, but is also often seen as a bulwark against a quick return of ISIS. By pulling out too soon, the U.S. would lose options to curb Iran and to influence a political solution in Syria. There are longer-term consequences to watch out for, as there were for President Obama when he pulled out of Iraq. Stabilization is also one step that paves the way for other important efforts around reconciliation, development, and sustainability in defeating ISIS and its ideology in areas it previously held. All are integral to lasting stabilization and national security priorities for the U.S. and its partners. There is much at stake in Trump's decision over the coming period.

Trump's Syria Strategy in the Making

On April 3, President Trump surprised many—including his military leaders—when he announced a new Syria policy, stating that “I want to get out. I want to bring our troops back home.” He added that the U.S. had gotten “nothing out of \$7 trillion [spent] in the Middle East over the last 17 years,” and he put the brakes on \$200 million in U.S. stabilization funding in Syria.⁴⁰

That same day, CENTCOM commander General Joseph Votel (responsible for the military campaign against ISIS), State Department envoy to the coalition Brett McGurk, and USAID administrator Mark Green were at USIP describing plans for a continued U.S. presence in Syria, both to finish the job militarily and to build resilience through post-conflict stabilization against an ISIS resurgence.⁴¹ Votel told the audience that “the hard part, I think, is in front of us ... and that is stabilizing these areas, consolidating our gains, getting people back to their homes ... There is a military role in this.”^{42,43} The divergence in views between Trump and others in his administration was glaring.

Trump's approach to Syria is consistent with his worldview. He thinks the United States has wasted money in the Middle East on unsuccessful nation-building and that regional partners do and pay too little. As early as 2013, during the heated discussion about Obama's expected military retaliation for Assad's use of chemical weapons, Trump tweeted, “Do NOT attack Syria, fix U.S.A.” He knows his political constituency does not wish to see the U.S. in another ground war in the Middle East, and he prefers to fix U.S. infrastructure rather than pay for other countries' reconstruction with American taxpayers' money. Likewise, his insistence on burden-sharing remains a consistent theme. Foreshadowing the current debate, Trump tweeted about Syria in 2013, “Why are these rich Arab countries not paying us?”⁴⁴

Fast forward to 2018, and Trump is announcing plans for troop withdrawal and arguing that Saudi Arabia and others should pick up the tab in Syria. In short, his statements ought not to have come as a total surprise to the main players at the Defense Department, State, and USAID, who support a continued U.S. military and stabilization role in Syria.

Inside the administration, there has been an effort to fence off stabilization from reconstruction to move it away from Trump's “no nation-building” restriction. That effort was evident, as Mark Green explained at USIP, that “stabilization programs are more than just manifestations of American generosity. They are, instead, key components of our national security planning.”⁴⁵ Trump's decision to freeze stabilization funding indicates that he does not care much about that distinction.

In mid-April, Trump re-engaged in Syria—although briefly—by carrying out a retaliatory strike with France and the UK after Assad used chemical weapons in Douma. Once again, as in 2017, the president wished to demonstrate that unlike Obama, who vacillated about responding to Assad's 2013 use of chemical weapons, which breaches international

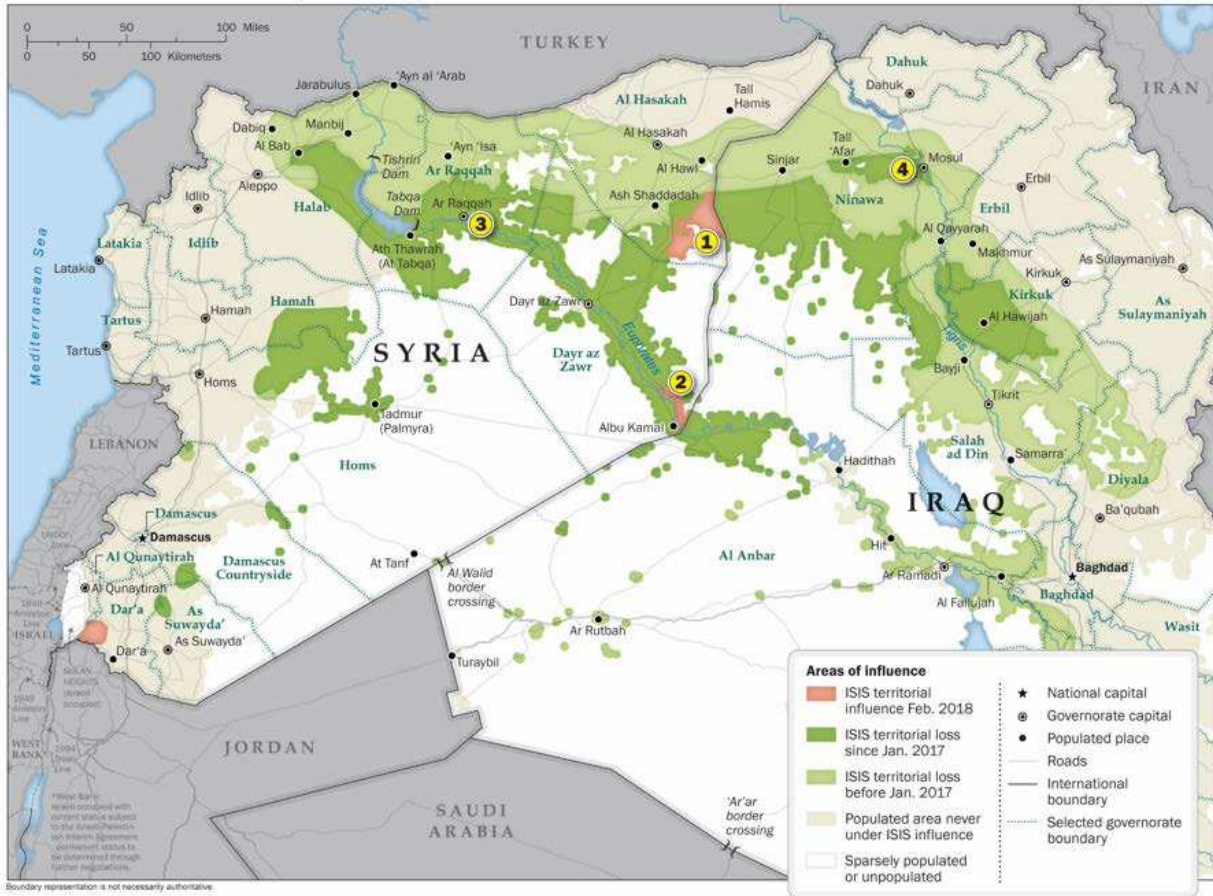
norms, Trump would act. But Trump's retaliatory targeted strikes in 2017 and 2018 were not part of a broader strategy to take the U.S. further into Syria's civil war or against Assad, which explains why afterward, he tweeted in good faith: "Mission accomplished."

The question of when and how the U.S. leaves Syria remains an open one. After meeting with Trump in Washington in late April, French president Macron boasted that "we convinced him it was necessary to stay for the long term." But such optimism could prove short-lived.⁴⁶

Currently, the administration's debate on departure is safely ensconced in the internal bureaucratic process. But it is more than likely that once the U.S. military can report success against ISIS in its two remaining pockets in eastern Syria, Trump will again raise the prospect of pulling the military out.

The campaign against ISIS in Syria has slowed down considerably because the Kurdish elements of the SDF are redeploying to counter Turkey in the north. During the Turkish incursion into Afrin, the Kurds felt abandoned by the U.S. Adding to that, the top-level public message about U.S. military withdrawal has had a chilling effect on the SDF's willingness to return to continue the fight against ISIS. As a substitute, the U.S. and its allies have begun a targeted air campaign against the last two areas under ISIS control, as illustrated by the pink areas on the map below.

ISIS Areas of Influence, February 2018



Source: U.S. Department of State, Office of the Presidential Envoy for the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS

At the same time, the U.S. military has continuously nudged the SDF to return and finish the battle against ISIS. In early May, the SDF announced that it would continue fighting, yet given the current situation, it could have a strategic self-interest in slowing down the fight to delay the expected U.S. withdrawal. This could explain a statement by Saleh Muslim, leader of the Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD), who said that the fight against ISIS “will take a long time, maybe years and years ... Daesh can move between Iraq and Syria. They are not going to be finished so easily.”⁴⁷

Impact of a U.S. Withdrawal on Stabilization, and Other Consequences

A U.S. withdrawal from Syria would clearly have serious consequences. A diminished or non-existent U.S. role on the ground would enable Iran to expand its presence through Syria, to the detriment of Israel’s security.

Withdrawal would be equally detrimental to American leverage in finding a political solution to Syria's war, in which Assad is sustained by Russia and Iran. Assad continues to pursue offensives and retake territory held by the opposition; the regime's June 2018 escalation in the southwest showed not only its continued aggression to retake territory, but the geopolitical realities at stake. These are clear when we consider that this is an offensive by forces enjoying Russian and Iranian support, into an area of strategic concern for the U.S., Israel, and Jordan.

French president Macron has pushed for a continued U.S. presence in Syria to help curb Iran's regional influence. Granted, U.S. bargaining power is already somewhat reduced, with the bargaining table over Syria's future increasingly populated by Russia and Iran via the Astana format, which bypasses the Geneva format for a political solution, led by the UN and preferred by the United States.

For the Kurdish-led SDF, which has valiantly led the local battles against ISIS in Syria, a withdrawal would mean an even more uncertain future. If the Syrian Kurds were completely abandoned, they would likely reorient themselves toward accommodation with Russia and the Assad regime, further reinforcing Russian and Iranian chokeholds on Syria's future. For American military advisors who have been working alongside the SDF for years, it would feel like a betrayal of a trusted and capable partner.

If the U.S. withdraws, the Assad regime, aided by Iran and Russia, would undoubtedly test the resolve of local U.S. partners. In fact, this happened in Deir e Zour in February, when pro-Assad forces tried to retake ground previously captured by the SDF. The U.S. responded militarily, killing hundreds of Russian military contractors, so-called "little green men,"⁴⁸ which Secretary of State-designate Mike Pompeo confirmed publicly in his congressional hearing.⁴⁹ Without a U.S. presence, the "green men" and Iranian militia would seize the day.

On the flip side, U.S. abandonment of the SDF and the Syrian Kurds might lead to improved relations with Turkey, which perceives U.S. collaboration with the Syrian Kurds as support for the terrorist-designated PKK. Such thinking is behind the attempt to find a compromise between Turkey and local forces in contested Manbij. But there is no assurance that such moves by the U.S. would be sufficient to placate Turkey and restore U.S.-Turkey relations to the status quo ante. Generally, Turkey has become a much more recalcitrant ally inside and outside of NATO. And Russia stands ready to play the Kurdish card to gain leverage over Ankara, to the long-term detriment of the United States in the region.

As for stabilization efforts in the SDF-liberated areas, a military withdrawal would create difficulties. It is definitely possible that existing partners would increase their contributions and thus burden-sharing, or that new partners would step up. But the U.S. presence has an impact beyond the stabilization money handed out. Without this military presence, stabilization efforts would be hard for both U.S. civilian agencies and partners

to sustain. These agencies, and others, depend heavily on the military presence for protection.

The Stabilization Freeze, the “Saudi Deal,” and Options for Passing the U.S. Stabilization Baton to Others

President Trump has emphasized that Saudi Arabia should make a greater contribution. According to a *Washington Post* article, Trump said after a phone call with King Salman that he had struck a deal securing \$4 billion, which could make it possible for the U.S. to pull out of Syria.⁵⁰ In the same spirit, there are stories about a possible multinational Arab military presence sponsored by the Saudis. None of this, however, has yet come to fruition.

Tellingly, at the EU Syria donor conference in April, Saudi Arabia pledged \$100 million vs. Germany’s euro 1 billion, raising further doubts about Saudi generosity. The idea of a stronger Saudi presence, including a military presence, has been floating around for a long time without materializing. As one administration official put it to me, “Let us see it before we believe it.” Furthermore, a Saudi presence in Syria is not the same as an American presence, since the military presence of an Arab country could inflame rather than calm already strong sectarian tensions among Syria’s warring factions. In contrast, the current U.S. military presence benefits from a friendly and welcoming local attitude in SDF-controlled areas. As General Votel cautioned, “It would be difficult for someone to immediately step in and replace us,” although he added that given time, the U.S. military could hand the baton to other forces.⁵¹

Another way forward would be to push other allies in the Coalition against ISIS members to step up their contributions. This is already underway. France has increased stabilization efforts in Raqqa and SDF-controlled areas, to the point that Turkish president Erdogan has harshly objected. In April, when France hosted an SDF delegation for conversations about stabilization, Erdogan asserted that France was “abetting terrorism” and warned that France “will not be able to rid [itself] of this terror burden ... As long as the West nurtures these terrorists, [it] will sink.”⁵² The UK contributes directly to civil society organizations and early recovery efforts in the Raqqa area; in this manner it deftly dodges the thorny issue of direct support to the Raqqa Civilian Council, which Turkey has singled out as an illegitimate Kurdish front organization.

Additionally, Europeans are contributing to the current—and essential—demining in Raqqa. The EU contributed \$12 million to Mines Advisory Group, while Germany provided \$12 million and Denmark \$7.5 million to Tetra Tech, both demining contracting companies present in Syria and Latvia and Kosovo made smaller contributions. The Syria Recovery and Trust Fund (SRTF), which counts members such as Germany, France, Denmark, UAE, Saudi Arabia, and Kuwait, is also expected to start operating soon in northeastern Syria. All these efforts are examples of burden-sharing at its best.

Still, the current, fast-paced demining effort by Tetra Tech is estimated to cost \$5 million a month. If U.S. funding grinds to an early halt, there is a risk that partner pledges will not fill the gap quickly enough to continue the operation. As the late Raqqa Civil Council member Omar Alloush said in warning of a loss of U.S. influence, “The people will choose the person that will fix their house for them.”⁵³

What about transferring stabilization to the UN? The UN has recently received Syrian government approval to enter Raqqa and has started delivering humanitarian assistance through Jordan. The UN estimates that around 100,000 people have returned to the city, a third of the pre-war population, although many returnees are injured or die from uncleared mines.⁵⁴ Bringing the UN in with full-scale UNDP-style stabilization would require the consent of both the Assad regime and Russia. Thus, letting the UN lead stabilization efforts would undoubtedly facilitate a return of authority to Assad in the ISIS-liberated areas. Besides, the current UN appeal for humanitarian assistance in Syria is underfunded, suggesting that donors would be unlikely to step up for a more political stabilization effort.

Another, more speculative, option, is using oil revenues for stabilization, since the territories currently controlled by the SDF hold the bulk of Syria’s oil. Potentially, a revenue-sharing mechanism could be established to transfer a certain amount to stabilization efforts. The morally ambiguous issue with the oil revenues is that the Kurds sell mainly to the Assad regime, although some barrels find their way to the black market in Turkey.

The bottom line is this: There is increasing burden-sharing, but it is not happening very fast or on a very large scale (the Saudi option). Thus, a U.S. stabilization freeze and possible quick withdrawal would leave important towns such as Raqqa nothing more than piles of rubble.

Stabilization as a Bargaining Chip for Syria’s Future

“Stabilization is political,” according to the newly minted report of the Stabilization Assistance Review, which the State Department, Department of Defense, and USAID jointly published in April.⁵⁵ This is true, and even more so in Syria, where American-led stabilization efforts serve as a bulwark against ISIS returning, make cities livable again for refugees, and serve as a U.S. bid—although timid—for a future Syria outside of Assad’s control. In other words, stabilization is political leverage for Syria’s future. Then-secretary of state Tillerson made that link in his January strategy for Syria, stating that “our diplomatic efforts will be characterized by stabilization initiatives and a new emphasis on the political solution to the Syrian conflict.”⁵⁶

How his successor, Mike Pompeo, will connect these dots remains to be seen. Pompeo has been tough on Iran, but to what degree that could impact Syria strategy is still unknown. Any change in military mission must initially pass through Defense Secretary Mattis—who,

though tough on Iran, is unlikely to see an expansion of the military mission as desirable. Such an expansion also runs counter to Trump's priority of bringing troops home and not into another Middle Eastern conflict, even with Iran. Congress is also increasingly set to rein in any expansion of military goals in Syria, possibly through a revamped Authorization to Use Military Force (AUMF), which Senators Corker and Kaine have been working on.⁵⁷

Yet it is important to recognize that other actors in Syria also use post-conflict stabilization as a tool for political leverage. Turkey's Euphrates Shield mission is one example. Turkey's incursion into Afrin mirrored U.S. efforts with stabilization funding and establishment of local councils. In reality, these missions are cover for an ethnic dislocation program, with Kurds fleeing the area and local militia loyal to Turkey taking over. The result will be a Turkish-style safe zone—and Turkey's bargaining chip to ensure that Syria's future does not include an autonomous Kurdish region.

Next Steps?

National Security Advisor John Bolton, Secretary of State Pompeo, and Defense Secretary Mattis will be the team to bring this issue forward. The new arrivals are finely attuned to the Trumpian logic and will carry out the balancing act of translating his instincts into policy.

The strongest argument for staying on, aligned with Trumpian logic, would likely be to avoid repeating Obama's errors. Trump faulted Obama for leaving Iraq in 2011 too hastily, leading to instability and the subsequent growth of ISIS, and has clearly stated that he does not want to make the same mistake. With this line of reasoning, Trump can probably be convinced to stay on a bit longer in Syria, bolstered by the facts on the ground, where the military battle is not over—as ISIS demonstrated with its latest message encouraging its followers and fighters.

The next-best argument would be Iran. Without a U.S. military presence in Syria, Iran would have an even greater opportunity to expand its influence. As Trump said during Macron's visit, "We don't want to give Iran open season to the Mediterranean."⁵⁸

If such calculations convinced Trump to stay on for a time and unfreeze the stabilization funds, there would be some breathing room for further stabilization work and a gradual increase in contributions from other donors. Still, the question remains whether such work would be futile if the U.S. pulls out militarily and Assad/Russia takes control of the ISIS-liberated areas, by force or through a deal with the Kurds. Unfortunately, the president's current signals about withdrawing are already having a chilling effect on local partners on the ground, which will be difficult to reverse. Withdrawing too soon could lead to a worst-case scenario in which the United States is continuously held responsible for Syria's never-ending civil war but does not have enough investment to influence outcomes.

Appendix A: Author Biographies

Jonas Parello-Plesner is a Senior Fellow at Hudson Institute, where he leads a project on Middle East politics and the stabilization and reconstruction of Iraq and Syria financed by a grant from DANIDA, the Danish International Development Agency.

Before joining Hudson, Parello-Plesner was responsible for the Embassy of Denmark's Department of Security and Foreign Policy in Washington, where he helped devise policies related to coalition efforts against ISIS. He has long-standing experience in the Danish Foreign Service and served in the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs while studying at the Ecole Nationale d'Administration in Paris.

From 2010-13, Parello-Plesner was also a Senior Policy Fellow at the European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR) with a focus on European-Chinese relations. He served as Senior Advisor on China and North-East Asia to the Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs from 2005-09 and has provided testimony on Chinese investments in Europe to the U.S. Congress and the European Parliament's Foreign Affairs and International Trade Committees. His co-authored book, *China's Strong Arm: Protecting Citizens and Assets Abroad*, was published in 2015 by IISS/Routledge and launched at the annual Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore.

Parello-Plesner has published widely on geopolitics, China, and European affairs. He has written op-eds for or been quoted in *The Wall Street Journal*, *Financial Times*, *Le Monde*, *ElPais*, *International Herald Tribune*, *Frankfurter Rundschau*, *Foreign Policy*, *EUobserver*, *Asia Times*, and *East Asia Forum*. In addition, he has made appearances on Fox News, CNN, Bloomberg, FRANCE24, Channel 4, and Danish Broadcast. He is a graduate of the London School of Economics, Copenhagen University, and the Ecole Nationale d'Administration in Paris.

Appendix B: Acknowledgements

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