



Intervention hangovers in stabilisation operations. Case studies from Afghanistan and Iraq

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ABSTRACT

This paper argues that the emergence of stabilisation as a concept out of peace-building, state-building and counter-insurgency theories has carried with it some of the key weaknesses of international intervention, in particular the idea that imposing western liberal systems on non-western societies will contribute towards stability. With reference to two case studies, the Wheat Seed project in Afghanistan and a gas cylinder distribution project in Iraq, the paper argues that stabilisation activities do not engage fully with the underlying premise that stabilisation must support and engender local political legitimacy, in part because of the conceptual baggage that stabilisation has adopted from other areas. The paper concludes by arguing that greater use should be made of the knowledge and histories of non-western state formation, characterized as being non-Weberian, as a counter to the overuse by interveners of the desire to support rational Weberian state structures in other countries.

I. INTRODUCTION

Failed states that are unable to control their territory, respond to climate change or criminal and terrorist networks, or contain nuclear proliferation are considered to be the key threats to the global system. The states that take the lead in global politics and economics argue they want 'stability' to continue their political affairs, grow their own and others' economies and allow their citizens to live their lives in peace (White House, 2010, pp. 1-6; Cabinet Office, 2008, p. 3). Despite the relative success of ensuring inter-state stability, these states view the growing threats from fragile states with concern, as they have become increasingly focused on intra-state instability. Recognising that intra-state instability is complex, the field of *stabilisation* has emerged in part out of peace-building and state-building theories, as well as being a consequence of military doctrine over the last two decades.

Stabilisation has attracted a great deal of attention among several major governments as a tool for implementing complex, multi-faceted programmes involving multiple government agencies in other states, often in hostile environments. These programmes are often referred to as Whole-of-Government Approach, Comprehensive Approach or the '3D's' – Defence, Diplomacy and Development (Patrick and Brown, 2007, pp. 1-3). However, the notion of stabilisation has suffered from a lack of coherence and fails to recognise the distorting influence of its heritage in modern western state formation. In the absence of any well developed conceptual thinking on stabilisation, it remains an area which draws from other theories as it becomes operationalised. Moreover, additional challenges emerging from recent stabilisation interventions reinforce the importance of the non-state governance agenda in stabilising societies and building state capacity, an agenda which offers very little manoeuvrability for

donor governments that are mandated to do business with state institutions and actors. If the failure of peace-building and state-building has led to the emergence of stabilisation, stabilisation must learn two paradigmatic lessons. The first is that the concern for stability is not about preventing collapse, but about promoting state consolidation against the ravages of regional pressures and globalization. The second is that the best way of acceptance that the most stable form of polity is that built on local political legitimacy. Its formation, achieving this is not through a defined list of activities (which is the current trend), but through an and how to support or undermine it, are the critical elements of understanding stabilisation, not a trite roll-out of peace-building and state-building measures, including democracy, free trade and liberal laws.

This paper will assert that there are significant challenges in the way stabilisation is conceived, particularly in terms of the paradigm of state failure. The paper also argues that, in addition to most forms of international intervention, stabilisation interventions fail to grasp the local realities and local political legitimacy formation which must underpin state consolidation if the global system is to cope with the increasing stresses on states. Based on two case studies involving stabilisation projects, the paper will also demonstrate why in-depth knowledge of the non-state agenda becomes critical for stabilising and developing local legitimacy.

2. THE EMERGENCE OF STABILISATION

Out of peace-building, state-building and counter-insurgency doctrine, a specific brand of state support has emerged that is often referred to as 'stabilisation'. Stabilisation emerged in the wake of international military efforts in

Afghanistan and Iraq, as some states in the international community struggled to cope with the form of ‘new wars’ which they were facing and the need to re-equip their forces for prosecuting counter-insurgency operations (COIN) in the context of 21st-century international political economy and an emboldened media and human rights discourse (Blair and Fitzgerald, 2009). Stabilisation in this form is distinct from economic stabilisation or political stabilisation stemming from European political aims for regional stability since the Balkan conflicts, which form part of the EU’s foreign policy agenda.

In some senses, the increasing localisation of intervention is an extension of the recognition that seemingly marginal ‘peripheral’ states such as Somalia or Afghanistan (in international terms) can have a significant impact on the ‘centre’ of international order. Regarding stabilisation, threats to the state in any region¹ can undermine the viability of the state itself (Goodhand, 2009, p. 7). This logic then determines that interventions should be carried out at lower and lower levels of administration.

It is important to recognise there is no theoretical foundation for stabilisation beyond the extension of peace-building, state-building and counter-insurgency theories. The only element of theoretical evolution comes from Stuart Gordon, who asserts that ‘it [stabilisation] is essentially a process that is ultimately rooted in *local perceptions of the legitimacy* and, crucially, the sustainability of their political authorities. As such, “stabilisation” involves the construction of a complex political discourse rather than the imposition of any particular political model’ (Jackson and Gordon, 2007, p. 653, emphasis added). Stabilisation is then more of

a policy than a theory, and its application bears testimony to new bureaucratic systems, as well as the ever increasing intensity of external interventions.

In practice the UK Government’s Stabilisation Unit² provides a much more focused aim, namely that stabilisation is ‘[t]he process by which underlying tensions that might lead to a resurgence in violence and a break-down in law and order are *managed and reduced*, whilst efforts are made to support preconditions for successful longer term development’ (Stabilisation Unit, 2007, p. 1).³ This encourages a rational-legal framework in the application of programmes to ‘manage and reduce’ instability, which seems at odds with the recognition that the best that could be hoped for in some cases is a messy, seemingly stagnant morass of problems. This is further at odds with the political and social context in fragile states such as Afghanistan, which, in Weberian terms, embody ‘traditional’ legitimacy with a patrimonial administrative system with the facade of rational-legal frameworks i.e. a Western or Soviet style bureaucracy (Rubin B., 2006, pp. 175–185; Giustozzi A., 2008, p. 1).

The approach to stabilisation outlined above also makes it possible to identify programmatic choices in interventions as having roots in broader and deeper western assumptions, particularly surrounding the role of the state and how states can be formed. This is

2 The UK’s lead department on stabilisation.

3 Alternative definitions of stabilisation are offered by the US government, which links stabilisation to stability, security, transition and reconstruction (USAID, 2008, p. 1). For the US military, ‘Stabilisation involves activities undertaken to manage underlying tensions, to prevent or halt the deterioration of security, economic, and/or political systems, to create stability in the host nation or region, and to establish the preconditions for reconstruction efforts’ (DoD, 2006, p. 2).

¹ For example, Helmand in Afghanistan, the Ferghana valley in Tajikistan or the Hadramawt in Yemen.

compounded by the fact that stabilisation has been operationalised through the Comprehensive Approach (or Whole of Government Approach, or the 3D's), which attempts to combine and coordinate intervention across several departments and ministries, normally defence, diplomacy and development, but augmented more recently by dedicated 'stabilisation' departments. In this context, it is important to note that the same levels of whole-of-government thought processes, culture and enabling bureaucracies do not exist in countries in receipt of whole-of-government programmatic instruments (Fitz-Gerald, 2008).

The literature suggests that a number of criticisms of stabilisation have started to emerge. First, the concept tends to assume that stabilisation interventions can be implemented in a linear programmatic fashion. For example, there may be a move from emergency aid and hearts and minds activities for force acceptance, to stabilisation operations which merge directly into longer-term development programmes. There is growing evidence of both positive and negative side effects of stabilisation activities, for example, the irrelevance of the Wheat Seed Distribution programme in Helmand in reducing opium cultivation, which had surprising governance benefits which were then not capitalised on.⁴

In reality these interventions are an outgrowth of trends within state-building and liberal peace-building concepts, which themselves draw on assumptions regarding democracy, trade and security that may be so ingrained they are not even recognised (Roberts, 2009, pp. 63-86; Richmond, 2009, pp. 324-344). Arguments about the failures of peace-build-

ing and to some extent counter-insurgency theory since the end of the Cold War have not recognised these assumptions, and by default have argued that failure means that a more extensive intervention should be tried in the future (cf. Paris, 2004, pp. 234-235), rather than attempting an alternative approach.⁵ This is despite the fact that there is often no one organisation that has the mandate to implement – let alone lead on – such an intervention.

Secondly, in trying to understand the outcomes of stabilisation, it may be useful to remember that, not only do interveners have different 'lenses' through which they activate stabilisation, but that the host nations can also instrumentalise incoming resources (Goodhand and Walton, 2009, pp. 303-323).⁶ Therefore, it is worth viewing stabilisation operations and their impacts as the result of multiple levels of fractionalisation. As an initial stage, the departments of intervening states place their own lenses on what stabilisation should be. These viewpoints are then transformed by both international and national politics (for example, in the framing of a UN mandate or Status of Forces Agreement). This alters the original strategic intention, but the implementation of the activity does not continue in a linear fashion. *Both* the host nation and interveners have different, at times competing ideas of what a 'stabilised' outcome is. Therefore, in the implementation of stabilisation actions there is a distortion of outcomes. This fractionalisation is superimposed on top of the existing

⁴ Based on interviews with both UK and US policy-makers involved in the 2008-2009 Wheat Seed Project in Afghanistan.

⁵ Other authors such as Barnett, 2006, and Roberts, 2009, have proposed republicanism and hybrid polities respectively, though these ideas are not necessarily politically acceptable or necessarily operational.

⁶ The model below does not take into account 'regional' actors, or other states not aligned with liberal peace-building (such as China, Iran or India), whose activities can have both macro state-level impacts and micro impacts on operational areas.

distortion that occurs between theories of state formation and state-building practice as noted above. This leads to a 'dual distortion' between the conception of intervention at a strategic level and the reality of outcomes at an operational level.

Thirdly, stabilisation has not adequately addressed the broader issue that the mere presence of the international community can be destabilising (Chuter 2009, p.39). Nor, by supporting an all-encompassing understanding of stability, has stabilisation fully accounted for the way in which activities undertaken as stabilisation can undermine one another, as well as the ultimate goal of stability.⁷ Forming states through stabilisation is not a benign process, but one which involves the often violent imposition of a political order. The imposition of political order ignores the fostering of local political relationships because the intervention is set within the framework of an international community whose demands are forced on to polities which do not necessarily agree with them (Hamilton-Baillie and Dennys, CIGI, 2011).

Finally, by aligning itself with state-building, stabilisation makes the logical fallacy that state formation can be somehow benign. The technocratic approaches applied in the field mask the reality that state formation (through state-building or stabilisation) must be violent for it to succeed because state formation theory demonstrates that this cannot be escaped in heterogeneous societies, no matter what form of state emerges (Tilly, C., 1985 and 1990; Collins, R., 1986).

Stabilisation theory therefore remains under-formulated and seems to continue and extend the evolution of peace-building and

state-building theories whilst it is being implemented and moulded by experience. Moreover, it appears that policy discourse on stabilisation and non-Weberian state-building is surpassing scholarly output on these subjects.⁸ Increasing instability has led to more and more interventionist approaches that are effectively attempts at state formation using the modern European experience and may actually undermine existing state structures. These interventions are inappropriate because they do not understand how to support local-level political legitimacy formation to support stability.

Eurocentric approaches to state-building, as laid down by Weber and Tilly, do not always translate into the processes experienced in other parts of the world (Tilly, C., 1985 and 1990; Collins, R., 1986). Early state theories help explain alternative processes, incentives and impairments to state formation in different regions, which may result in an understanding that there is more than one type of state (cf. Claessen and Skalnik, 1978, pp. 640-645). This also supports the argument that state formation in the 21st century is very different from state formation previously.

However, when state formation is then exogenously supported in other countries through state-building, because these states are deemed weak, failing or collapsed, the interveners use not just a Eurocentric view of what the state should be, but a *modern* Eurocentric paradigm which may be at odds with the context in which they are attempting to build a state. At best this can lead to ineffective interventions, and at worst contribute to failure.

⁷ This point is subject to ongoing-doctoral research by Christian Dennys.

⁸ This subject was discussed at a recent meeting at St. Catherine's College, Oxford University, on 27 September 2010. The meeting was chaired by Professor Paul Collier and organised by the International Growth Centre (IGC), London School of Economics.

Furthermore, as a result of the emerging security paradigm and the concern over failing states, a new, more intrusive and local form of state-building is now being advocated called *stabilisation*. This new approach suffers from the dual weaknesses of an ill-defined theoretical base, which contributes to programmatic confusion about the goals and aims of stabilisation. Secondly, there are assertions that some elements of stabilisation, particularly development, may have more impact than is actually the case.⁹

Therefore, in the interventions of the international community to support stability, there are two levels of distortions: at the *strategic* level (in state-building) and the *operational* level (in stabilisation). These distortions lead to programmes which are not only highly technical and promote an idealised version of a state, but may in actual fact promote tensions which undermine strategic and programmatic success. They are allowed to continue because there is a lack of theory and academic understanding about how to intervene in states which have distinct patterns and processes of state formation but are at the same time struggling to cope with the pressures of the international system and globalisation, which have effectively closed the most common form of state formation, namely open bloody warfare.

The inability to understand non-European state formation in the 21st century is a critical issue which contributes to strategic level failure. This is made worse by the fact that stabilisation has emerged as the process (and goal) of international interventions, which has essentially developed peace-building and state-building practices into local level interventions by exter-

nal states in a host country. These processes are then applied in fragile, often violent contexts and fail to take account of the actual benchmark which would secure stability, namely the formation of local political legitimacy.

Fostering legitimacy through programme-led stabilisation

The preceding sections have argued that, based on the fact that policy discourse on state-building currently surpasses scholarly output, and in the absence of research on non-Weberian approaches to state-building, stabilisation offers a more contemporary form of state-building. Earlier sections also alluded to the 'dual distortion' that occurs as a result of the incompatibility of Eurocentric Westphalian approaches to state-building with a range of societies and institutional structures in countries emerging from conflict, and with the second level of 'distortion' occurring at the operational level, where, due to the differences in the nature of the state, stabilisation efforts depart significantly from the strategic objectives of the interventionists. As illustrated in Figure 1, the primary challenge appears to lie in promoting both legitimacy and stability simultaneously in areas outside the immediate reach of traditional state institutions.

In order to investigate further the mutually dependent phenomena of stability and legitimacy, data drawn from two stabilisation projects were used to examine ways in which the development of 'legitimacy' might serve as an overarching objective alongside stabilisation operations. The first project was a large initiative to distribute wheat seed to thousands of farmers in Helmand province, Afghanistan in 2008-9. The second was a smaller initiative to distribute gas-cylinders in Basra, Iraq, in 2003.

⁹ This argument is the subject of on-going Doctoral research by Christian Dennys, but similar findings have also been noted by Wilder and Gordon, 2009.

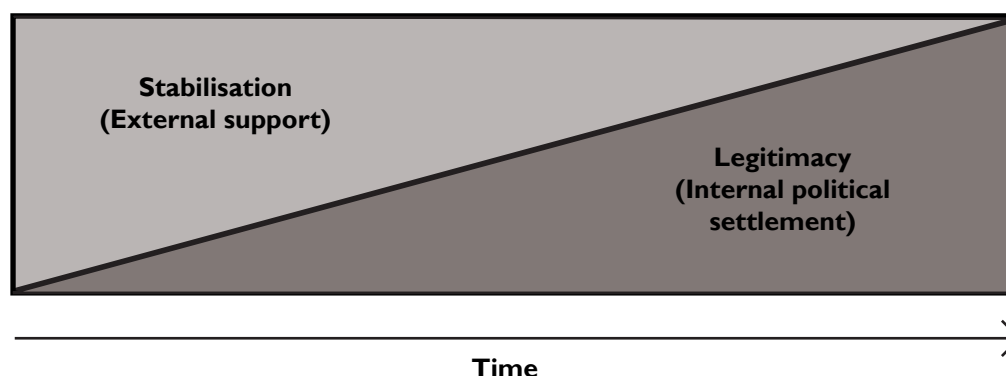


Figure 1: The Stabilisation-Legitimacy Spectrum (source: Authors, 2010)

3. THE WHEAT SEED PROJECT¹⁰ IN HELMAND, AFGHANISTAN

In 2008, as a result of donor efforts (primarily the UK) to support counter-narcotics efforts and curb poppy production, as well as the development community's wider efforts to promote alternative livelihoods (led by DfID and latterly also implemented by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID)), a Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT)-led project was initiated which sought to promote the production of wheat.

According to representatives from the wider donor community, the rationale for such a

project appeared to be 'sound'.¹¹ At the time that the project was launched, the market price for wheat was high (compared to the low prices of the previous few years) and poppy prices were decreasing; in addition, the wheat also served as a means by which Governor Mangal of Helmand Province could offer something from the state to the farmers in parts of the province. The project was therefore perceived as being something that was 'driven' and 'owned' by the governor, but supported and implemented by the PRT. It was hoped that this would empower state governance systems.

The programme provided wheat seed and fertiliser to 11,700 farmers in its first year, with the wheat seed and fertilizer being deposited (often by helicopter) at the district centres for the governors to arrange and oversee distribution. Temporary employees in some districts sub-contracted from the Asia Foundation were also recruited to help oversee distribution.¹² The wheat seed distribution would then help the promotion of a non-opium agricultural economy by encouraging farmers to switch to wheat.

¹⁰ There is, in fact, more than one wheat distribution programme, one led by USAID and one led by the UK Government. It is possible that problems associated with one wheat distribution programme may be the result of the specific designs of that programme. For example, one of the issues encountered was the Taliban taxing the farmers who collected the wheat: what is not currently clear is whether this affects the USAID programme, which only distributes from Lashkargar, asking farmers to come in to the city from outlying districts, or the governor-led programme which is run from Gereshk (5,000), Sangin (2,000), Musa Qala (900), Kajaki (200) and Garmsir (3,600). (Data from Counter-Narcotics Helmand Plan Review 2009, held by authors). This case study focuses on the UK-funded Governor-led Wheat Distribution programme and on the first year of the programme in 2009, rather than the revised version in 2010.

¹¹ Based on interviews with senior military officers and civilian PRT personnel deployed to Garmsir during the implementation of the Wheat Seed Project.

¹² Interview with stabilisation official, 4th December 2009.

Wheat distribution is only one part of counter-narcotics activities, and therefore controlling for unintended consequences and identifying the causal link between one intervention and the desired outcome is very challenging. However, research findings from Cranfield University indicate that the programme only enjoyed very limited success in reducing opium production, despite being declared a success (Taylor et al, 2009 and MOD, 2009). This was largely due to the ambitious scale of the project, which led to some seed arriving too late in some districts. There may, however, be lessons for the aims of stabilisation, which can be split into both positive and negative unintended consequences.

Stabilisation consequences of the Wheat Seed Project

There were a range of negative unintended consequences, including the potential use of the fertilizer in the USAID distribution programme to produce improvised explosive devices (IEDs), government corruption in distribution and the Taliban taxing farmers who had collected the wheat.

These three issues are all significant. Whilst the fertilizer was tested to ensure it could not be used to produce IEDs, it contributed to the debate about the source of materials for IEDs. The debate itself centred on ammonium nitrate, which has been used in fertilizers in Afghanistan for some time. Concerns about the potential that a donor programme could be supporting IED production were significant and were assisted by efforts in Kabul by a committee of the Office of National Security Council to ban all ammonium nitrate imports into Afghanistan. The ban, announced by President Karzai in January 2010, was largely seen as positive (Cullison and Trofimov, 2010), though the implemen-

tation of screening systems at border crossings was much slower.¹³

There were also widespread allegations of corruption at both the provincial and district levels regarding the distribution of the wheat seed and fertilizer. Whilst most officials regard the administration of Governor Mangal to be relatively free of corruption, one of his officials was arrested in connection with allegations of corruption in the wheat seed distribution programme. Lower down the chain, district governors and elders charged with distribution and collection were also accused of taking cuts from the distribution in respondent interviews, as well as in the media. These multiple levels of corruption continue to reinforce the broader perception that President Karzai's administration is highly corrupt, even when the government is supposed to be giving them something for free (and which is paid for by an external donor).

Finally, during the implementation of the project, there were allegations that the Taliban was also taxing farmers who had collected wheat seed and fertilizer as part of the taxation system. There were also issues related to higher levels of rural insecurity, which also impacted on the wheat seed project. Roadblocks set up by the Taliban ensured that some of the wheat seed and fertilizer provided to the local farmers at central distribution points was confiscated on the return journey back to the farms. Other recipients did not use the wheat for planting but stored it in the district centres for resale at a later date.¹⁴

It is also alleged by some respondents that the close links between some governance actors and the Taliban ensured that both sides

¹³ One of the authors was present at the meeting at which this was discussed in the ONSC in 2010.

¹⁴ Interview with stabilisation official, 4th December 2009.

benefited from the programme; more specifically, the Taliban allowed the programme to go ahead without physically punishing recipients of the wheat and fertiliser so long as appropriate 'taxes' could be collected. Equally, some government officials and elders were complicit in colluding to allow this to happen, even though this meant sanctioning Taliban interference.¹⁵

These concerns contrasted markedly with the public discourse on the programme, which seems to focus almost entirely on the positive side. Interviews with UK commanders and US military information seemed to indicate a high degree of acceptance of the programme and willingness among local communities to take very significant risks in participating and claimed that the programme was leading the change in opium cultivation in Helmand more broadly (Larcombe and Willetts, 2009; MOD Oracle, 2009).

Despite the myriad challenges and the negligible effect on the opium economy, the project was seen as bolstering the legitimacy of the governor. This positive outcome, however, was hard for the implementers to capitalise on, as information which clearly demonstrated the positive effect on governance was stove-piped within the military chain of command for some time. By the time it was broadly realised in the civilian sphere, follow-up action was deemed to be too late.¹⁶

Lessons

Whilst many critics of the programme commented on the extent to which insurgents could have used the fertiliser and wheat seed to create improvised explosive devices (IEDs), other

PRT members who managed the programme confirmed that tests on the chemical composition of the fertiliser had been carried out to ensure that it could not be used for IED purposes. In addition, the Afghan government's eradication force (used to eradicate poppies if the farmers were not growing wheat seed) remained a corrupt organisation and responded to the lines of authority through patronage in these regions. As a result, only a select number of poppy fields were eradicated. These dynamics indicate the impact of both the non-state system of governance and the undermining role played by agents of insecurity.

It is also the view of the authors that the capacity required to support the broader roll-out of the programme was simply beyond the ability of the Afghan government. It is only recently (in late 2010) that agricultural extension workers from the Ministry of Agriculture have been able to leave Lashkar Gah and move to southern Nahr-I Sarraj and western areas of Nad-I Ali, let alone move to or around the more outlying districts.¹⁷ The lack of Afghan government support more broadly (other than the district governors) suggests that the longer term the developmental aspects of the programme can hardly be expected to be significantly positive. The absence of roads to bring anything out of Helmand province is also a good example of how the lack of infrastructure necessary to make the project sustainable in the longer-term – and thus to manage and maintain local expectations – creates another area of vulnerability, particularly as this blocks access to demand-driven markets.

The wheat seed distribution programme was a serious undertaking, but it had little direct effect on its intended target – the opium

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Interview with NATO official in Kabul, 9th December 2010.

economy. However, it was able to support local perceptions of the local government, which was, on balance, positive, despite the fact that opportunities were lost in capitalising on the effect. However, its lack of engagement with a broader range of state and non-state actors may have contributed to the lack of long-term momentum from the project's impact on governance.

4. THE GAS CYLINDER PROJECT IN BASRA, IRAQ

The provision of gas cylinders in Basra, Iraq, was a stabilisation project initiated in the immediate post-conflict ('TELIC I') phase of operations during the summer of 2003. At this time, the situation was such that the delivery of all basic state services in Basra, including water, electricity and other public provision, had become uncertain and unreliable. In addition, the cessation of state pension payments, the inability to withdraw money from the bank to trade in the market, and the significant security vacuum opened further areas for potential popular dissent and deteriorating conditions.

During this time, the British Army was the main (and one of the only) post-conflict actor on the ground in Iraq. It is worth noting that, during 2003, the concept of civil-military cooperation and inter-operable stabilisation functions had not yet matured, and donor governments such as the UK and the US were, at best, developing their in-house policy on stabilisation. As such, access to budgets such as those now commanded by the Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs) in Afghanistan and by the US Government's 'Commander's Emergency Response Program' (CERP) did not exist. For this reason, only relatively inexpensive quick impact projects (QIPs) could be considered in order to avoid the long delays incurred by issuing requests for funding through the coalition head-

quarters in Baghdad or national capitals. These funding limitations impacted on the scope and breadth of the urgent project work that could be undertaken.

Based on a range of possible project options for QIP funding, priority was given to the distribution of gas cylinders to households in order that people could cook food and have access to potable drinking water. The decision to fund and implement the gas cylinder project was made at the brigade level and became the preferred stabilisation project over a number of other possible options.¹⁸ It was felt that the project would demonstrate a response to the people, address a gap in the provision of basic state services and address a number of immediate security vulnerabilities.¹⁹ The situation for the British Army in Iraq was particularly delicate because of its perceived position of 'pre-conflict invader *cum* post-conflict reconstructor'. For this reason, there was a real need to build confidence among local Iraqi people and groups.

Stabilisation consequences of the Gas Cylinder Project

The Gas Cylinder Project appeared to bolster the credibility of the interventionist forces and their commitment to restoring basic services. According to the interviews supporting this research, this increase in credibility became evident during the daily distribution of gas cylinders and the British Army's efforts to resurrect the gas trucks and aspects of the normal supply chain. Some respondents also noted that the show of commitment disincentivised recourse to the black market to meet basic service needs.

¹⁸ Based on interviews with the members of the British Army's Black Watch battalion, May-June 2009.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

In the absence of basic services, black market entrepreneurialism often develops, the success of which can depend on the lack of access to basic provisions and the degree of confidence the indigenous population has in the interventionist forces. This black market entrepreneurialism is often driven by non-state networks or the rent-seeking behaviour of corrupt state officials.

Post-conflict black-market entrepreneurialism in Basra included the introduction of 'roadside banks', which filled a gap that the closure of banks had left in giving local people access to small amounts of money with which to trade in the market place and, therefore, to use for the purchase basic and affordable food items. Individuals operating in these 'currency kiosks' would issue small amounts of currency in exchange for an extortionate service charge, which was often nearly 50% of the original sum of money. As the local Iraqis observed UK soldiers making efforts to restore basic services, a number of returning unit and battalion commanders commented on the positive impact this had on limiting the spread of black-market activity, which was undermining confidence in the intervention effort. Efforts were also made to encourage agents of insecurity and organised networks operating around the market place not to loot the market kiosks and to provide safe passage for the local population, without intimidation. In return, interventionist forces agreed not to involve themselves in the business of these groups.

Following the initial efforts to distribute the gas cylinders, further efforts were made to enhance the local governance systems that were supporting this work. Subsequent activities saw the development of a 'water board' as a governing body monitoring and overseeing this local activity. Due to the variable membership of this board, the project contributed to strengthening an embryonic but emerging civil society voice, thus encouraging an insti-

tutional process at the municipal level. Over time, this governance process strengthened. Overall levels of community safety were also reportedly enhanced as a result of this activity. Lastly, trucks belonging to the company that had previously distributed the gas cylinders were repaired and made roadworthy, thereby strengthening the development of local infrastructure. Although the initial legitimacy of the international action in Iraq was in doubt, stabilising projects like this one managed to grow in to a modest legitimising force in Basra in subsequent years.

However many benefits appear to have accrued as a result of such small and incremental project-based activities, the distribution of gas cylinders project also led to some negative effects. As a result of the various lines of activity which opened up as a result of the efforts of the British Army, expectations were raised about the extent to which the Army would deliver further benefits in these wide-ranging areas. Without many other functions of the state having returned to normal, and in the absence of a comprehensive Iraqi state capacity to support these developments, resentment developed in some areas, as did the perception that the Army was not delivering on projects that had been initiated. In this case and in some respects, the interventionist forces had become victims of their own success. In some areas, this created security vulnerabilities, and some degree of 'backlash' occurred against the very thing that military forces are expected to provide: safety and security.

Lessons

Thus, ironically, despite the gains across society made by the British Army by demonstrating its commitment to address the wider and most important security gaps that had opened up in the immediate post-conflict aftermath in Iraq, the lack of wider development capacity

posed increasing vulnerabilities for the Army's own safety and security. This is one area where current, more cooperative, cross-government approaches to post-conflict stabilisation now yield dividends. However, the Gas Cylinder Project does provide a useful example of where the necessity for small, incremental project efforts can often produce more positive than negative unintended outcomes.

The experience in Iraq also serves as a reminder that, in the absence of well-guided state-building approaches supporting peripheral areas remote from capital city politics, a 'project-based' approach often becomes the default mode of engagement. Without the conditions in place for the ground to be laid for such projects – and whilst operating in extremely uncertain environments – there appears to be a need for knowledge to be held on peripheral dynamics and peripheral actors and for monitoring of such dynamics to continue in such a way as to inform decision-making in support of stabilisation initiatives. In these fluid stabilisation environments, the knowledge management that informs ongoing transformation and capacity-building is particularly critical when such a broad range of cross-government players are involved. These situations only become further complicated with a continuous rotation of personnel every six to nine months.

Although a project-based model often represents a smaller and more incremental approach, the Gas Cylinder Project illustrated the relative merits involved in pursuing an incremental and feasible project-based approach to stabilisation. This is particularly the case in the absence of more comprehensive strategies and in a vacuum of local knowledge. In contrast to the ambitious scale and scope of the Wheat Seed Project analysed in earlier sections, a 'scaled' project which considered both local and external resources proved to be helpful in anticipating a relatively positive local response. The small-scaled and incremental

project model also allowed for 'emergent planning' and adjustments and adaptation, as small successes were achieved.

Like the outcomes of the Wheat Seed Project in Afghanistan, it appears that some level of engagement with non-state actors is not only a prerequisite for progress, but also a necessary requirement in laying the foundations for the development of local political legitimacy. Political processes which develop physically remote from capital cities have limited prospects of sustaining themselves and contributing positively to institutional development if space is not created for such processes to take root. This does not suggest that 'deals' should be struck based on non-state forms of authority, but rather that this authority is better understood, and that the overall objectives of influential non-state organisations become a central consideration in project-based stabilisation interventions. If this requires dialogue with non-state actors, so be it.

5. ANALYSIS

The case studies above suggest both conceptual as well as operational issues that should be addressed for stabilisation interventions to be more effective.

Conceptually, the wheat seed intervention speaks volumes about the priorities of the donors rather than the Afghan state. Opium production is the main economic driver in Helmand, indeed one of the main drivers for the entire country,²⁰ but preventing that production is a key aim of the interveners. The Afghan state, nationally and locally, has shown

²⁰ The other major driver is the intervention itself. Afghanistan's own licit economy outside these two spheres is largely insignificant, hence Surkhe's (2009) point that Afghanistan is a *rentier* state.

remarkably little interest in dealing with the opium economy because of the interconnections between the state and the economic mafia.²¹ Therefore it is conceptually not clear how a programme designed to undermine a key economic sector would or could support local political legitimacy formation in the context where there is an ongoing civil war.²²

In the case of Iraq, the conceptual issues are related to the smaller and 'scaled' approach taken to building local political legitimacy in the region. The experience of the Gas Cylinder Project demonstrates the merits in complementing traditional state-building interventions with 'grass roots' peace-building, which, in the absence of rich local knowledge, might be best tackled through a process of 'trial and error'. These limited and more narrowly defined approaches to peace-building appear to offer utility in terms of both adaptation and adjustment, particularly in managing the intended and unintended consequence that arise, but also in responding to evolving local expectations, which one stakeholder group cannot cater for on its own.

In practice, the case studies imply that modifying development approaches that support the state, as in the Wheat Seed Project, can have multiple consequences, both positive and negative, foreseen and unforeseen. Whilst efforts were made to close down potential foreseen negative consequences with the work on ammonium nitrate, which was successful and was pushed back up the various chains of command to Kabul, resulting in a Presidential Decree, other unforeseen positive impacts were

not capitalized upon, and opportunities were lost by a lack of timely sharing of information between the actors working in the same geographical areas. Therefore information sharing needs to be more consistent and may need to address issues such as the classification of information, as well as undertaking better and more subtle preparation so that individuals being deployed recognize that the information that they are collecting may be of use to other people outside their normal reporting chain.

Secondly, and linked to the conceptual issues above, more sustained efforts need to be made with regard to translating stabilisation activities into political legitimacy. The missed opportunities in Helmand are of note compared to the success in Iraq with the water board – though this was not sustained over time, the lack of consistency in support and organic growth in stabilisation activities being the result of an overly projectized approach to intervention. Neither of the interventions was sufficiently flexible to cope with its environment, both of which were noted as being especially fluid. Thus, for example, in Iraq better use could have been made of the improvements in governance, which were to form the bedrock of political legitimacy and may not have needed a further project, with possible funding implications, but rather additional support processes, which could have sustained the water board initiative over a longer period.

The analysis suggests that, for stabilisation and the stability agenda really to gain traction, it needs to lose the negative elements it has acquired from state-building, peace-building and counter-insurgency and focus on a flexible approach to supporting local political legitimacy.

21 Interview with NATO official, October 16th 2010.

22 This characterisation of the conflict is derived from ongoing doctoral research by Mike Martin, which, if correct and as supported by the authors of this paper, would undermine the overall idea of applying counter-insurgency and stabilisation approaches in Helmand.

6. CONCLUSION

Whilst providing no more than a general overview, the stabilisation project data above offer further evidence for the importance of achieving both ‘stability’ and ‘legitimacy’ in the pursuit of stabilisation and non-Weberian state-building efforts. This is especially the case for district-level stabilisation interventions, which are relatively remote from stabilisation efforts supporting the development of central government institutions. The two case studies in this paper show how non-state actors can play an important role in supporting stability and creating their own legitimacy. The development of legitimacy simultaneous to efforts to ‘stabilise’ not only appears to promote more effective and sustainable stabilisation efforts, it also recognises the importance of developing a political architecture to support stabilisation that extends from the more sophisticated capitals of state institutions to the less sophisticated district societies, which, while often devoid of both human and political capital, represent the lynchpin for society-wide stabilisation in a country that is emerging from conflict.

The paper acknowledged the lack of research data supporting new ideas on the limitations of conventional Eurocentric state-building and state formation strategies. This appears to have led to the phenomenon whereby scholarly output on issues relating to state-building has been bypassed by policy discourse. This has also resulted in a discussion on the more contemporary role of stabilisation operations and on the application of stabilisation ‘approaches’ in peripheral areas of ‘non-Weberian states’. In this context, the analysis uncovered a ‘dual distortion’ effect whereby Westphalian notions of state-building are imposed in non-Weberian states, with more adverse consequences created when such Westphalian approaches to state-building are transferred to more peripheral regions. In order to create a stronger ‘platform’

for development between the centre and the periphery, the paper called for a parallel process to address both stability and local political legitimacy.

The lack of research data on this subject necessitated a closer examination of stabilisation ‘projects’. Recognising that post-conflict uncertainty and a lack of any internationally coordinated strategy often requires an ‘emergent planning’ approach to interventionist strategies, projects which then develop into broader programmes seemed to be a useful unit of analysis. Based on the overall analysis of the research data, two major issues appear to emerge.

The first issue concerns the existence of non-state groups and of a non-state ‘system of governance’ which is very prominent in regions of the world where nomadic and pastoral groups exist, and where cultural groupings transcend borders. This phenomenon accounts for the border characteristics of many of today’s failed states and states emerging from conflict. Due to the limited reach of central state institutions to peripheral areas of a country (particularly in larger states), the relationship between the state and society is weak, and social bonds with non-state systems of governance will almost always be underestimated. As a result, project-based intervention will require some engagement with these actors, even though it may have to take the form of low-level consultation and fact-finding. Otherwise the entrepreneurialism of non-state groups and their extended networks risks undermining any gains made by a specific stabilisation project. Indeed, the Wheat Seed Project in Afghanistan suggested that the outcome was a more ‘securitised’ society.

Secondly, when developing approaches to stabilisation interventions in ‘non-Weberian states’, there is merit in starting ‘small’. This will result not only in realistic levels of achievement, but also in achievements which can be

maintained by what is often a low level of human and institutional capacity in peripheral regions. There are also benefits involved in reintroducing ideas which have worked in the past and not introducing a level of sophistication and 'newness' which is difficult to comprehend, much less maintain. Given the fluidity of many situations, many outcomes of stabilisation efforts, both positive and negative, are 'unintended'. The introduction of small and incremental measures to support security-based project activity is important in order to manage the effects of unintended outcomes. Equally, the confidence required to support local state institutions cannot be developed overnight, but must be based on clear and tangible results.

Based on these conclusions, for stabilisation operations to focus simultaneously on creating stability and developing legitimacy, a project-driven approach to donor-funded stabilisation interventions must consider the relationship between the 'peripheral' state and society. This will indicate not only the degree to which non-state actors – and associate 'systems' – become central to project planning, but also the types and pace of projects which can be considered in seeking to penetrate this relationship.

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