Pursuing Effective and Conflict-Aware Stabilization
Lessons from beyond the Beltway

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THE ISSUE

■ While still early in implementation, the United States is often failing to uphold its stabilization principles in practice.
■ Substantial lessons can be drawn from the reasons why, especially as they relate to systemic issues found across the U.S. government.
■ Effective application of the U.S. government’s stabilization principles can lay the groundwork for implementation of the bipartisan 2019 Global Fragility Act.

INTRODUCTION

Facing political and budgetary constraints, the United States must be more disciplined in how it scopes and executes stabilization in conflict-affected countries to ensure it meets clearly defined goals. To this end, the U.S. government issued a framework in 2018 to guide effective and conflict-aware stabilization. However, while still early in implementation, the U.S. government is often failing to uphold its stabilization principles in practice. As defined by the Stabilization Assistance Review (SAR) framework report, stabilization is an “inherently political endeavor involving an integrated civilian-military process to create conditions where locally legitimate authorities and systems can peaceably manage conflict and prevent a resurgence of violence.” Select U.S. embassies are developing stabilization plans to complement their country strategies, intended to reflect the SAR’s principles. Rather than continuing to isolate stabilization lessons in siloed policy circles concerned with these issues, stabilization principles need to be directly infused into political and regional planning and engagement, especially for conflict areas. A broader look at other stabilization contexts demonstrates that the SAR framework can have utility in illuminating strengths, weaknesses, and gaps of U.S., allied, and partner approaches to stabilization. In addition, the bipartisan 2019 Global Fragility Act (GFA) legislation, signed by President Trump, requires the U.S. administration to create a 10-year strategy to address fragility, prevention of violent conflict, and stabilization in to-be-defined priority countries. Lessons learned from effective application of the SAR principles can lay the groundwork for the how the U.S. government implements the broader mandate of the GFA.

Over the past two years, CSIS’s Cooperative Defense Project (CDP) and Project on Prosperity and Development (PPD) have conducted research examining how the U.S. government can pursue more effective and conflict-aware stabilization. In year two of this initiative, CSIS conducted two case studies on Lebanon and Colombia to study the conflict drivers in each country and the alignment of U.S. and allied policy and programming to address them. The CSIS study team found that SAR principles offer broader utility to inform integrated, whole-of-government approaches tailored to specific country
contexts but also that SAR principles are not being upheld in these countries in practice. Substantial lessons can be drawn from the reasons why, especially as they relate to systemic issues found across the U.S. government.

**CASES IN POINT: LEBANON AND COLOMBIA**

This CSIS project selected Lebanon and Colombia as two case countries to visit and research, as they reflect certain important analytical criteria. Although neither Lebanon nor Colombia are included in the list of SAR pilot countries—partners identified by the U.S. government as the potential first tranche of countries where it would seek to implement SAR principles—they both have received stabilization-related assistance from the United States for decades and have experienced persistent and dynamic drivers of conflict. Both are middle-income countries facing economic hardships, governance challenges, spillover of conflict from neighboring countries, and heavy influence and interference from external actors. In Lebanon and Colombia, many of these challenges are legacies of long and violent civil wars exacerbated by enduring conflict dynamics. They both have also had long-term development, conflict prevention, stabilization, and security-sector assistance relationships with the United States. Thus, a study of these two cases allows for a longer horizon to assess U.S. policy and programming: the successes that can be replicated, the weaknesses that can be flagged, and the gaps that can be bridged.

**CONFLICT DRIVERS IN LEBANON AND COLOMBIA**

Although a plethora of factors enable volatility and conflict in Lebanon and Colombia, the following conflict drivers are key contributors to instability across both case studies.

**POOR GOVERNANCE AND ACCOUNTABILITY**

In both Lebanon and Colombia, poor or corrupt governance creates an inability to provide basic services, including health, education, and infrastructure. This erodes trust in the state and compels people to turn to other sources, including armed groups and terrorist organizations. Similarly, a lack of government accountability can also be destabilizing. For example, in Colombia, there have been reports that police and military are allowing armed groups and drug cartels to transport coca, the main ingredient in cocaine, across the country. As a result, many indigenous, Afro-Colombian, and farmer communities do not trust government security forces for protection and instead turn to their own protection services. In Lebanon, large swaths of the population turn to armed tribal militias or groups such as Hezbollah to provide protection and services that the government in Beirut is unable—and in some cases unwilling—to provide.

**ECONOMIC MALFEASANCE**

Economic malfeasance is another main driver of instability, especially when people cannot find employment in the formal economy. People facing the loss of a job oftentimes turn toward the informal economy to find employment. They are also at heightened risk of joining an armed or terrorist group. In Lebanon, the government is deeply indebted to local bank owners who happen to be among the country’s political elite; those same elites ostensibly lined their own pockets by lending money to Beirut’s public coffers at high interest rates. As a result, Lebanon now has one of the highest debt to GDP ratios in the world—national debt is estimated at over 157 percent of GDP—leading to vast unemployment, critical shortages in currency availability, and severe difficulty in repaying loans.

**DIFFUSION OF THE USE OF FORCE**

The state should have a monopoly over the use of force and deploy it in a publicly serving manner. Diffusion of the use of force occurs when non-governmental actors take control of swaths of territory and exert force to control it. A lack of political will—or worse, a desire to benefit from the proliferation of armed groups—can also result in a state relinquishing its monopoly over the use of force. The government thus loses the ability or cedes its authority to enforce laws in parts of the country, which elevates the status, influence, and control of illegal organizations. In Lebanon, the various security arms of the state are functionally controlled along sectarian lines: the leadership of the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) is Maronite Christian, the Internal Security Forces (ISF) are Sunni-led, and the Directorate of General Security (DGS) is Shia-led and thought to be aligned with Hezbollah, which has a powerful armed militia of its own. Meanwhile in Colombia, the diffusion of the use of force looks different but is no less impactful. Although there are strong laws restricting non-state actors, armed groups such as the Ejército de Liberación Nacional (ELN) control large swaths of territory; the government is unable to provide essential services, security, or enforce laws in those areas. Lack of trust in and credibility of the state security services in Colombia leads local populations to trust indigenous community security actors or at times rely on illicit actors, including the ELN, for security.
REGIONAL INSTABILITY
Regional instability can further exacerbate some of the conflict drivers listed above. It can also stand on its own as a driver. Instability in a region can have several spillover effects, including irregular migration and forced displacement, support to transnational threats, and outright conflict. An influx in migration can strain already fragile economies and divert resources from other needed social programs. Domestic conflicts within a state can also spill over throughout a region. Lebanon has a history of regional influence and interference, from a decade and a half of Syrian presence in and control over the country in the post-civil war years to regional competition between Iran and Saudi Arabia resulting in the propping up of armed and unarmed proxies. In Colombia, the Venezuelan crisis poses migration challenges and transnational threats, including, for example, the need to cope with at least 1.6 million Venezuelan refugees.

LESSONS LEARNED: IMPLICATIONS OF U.S. COMMITMENT
The nature of U.S. commitment to civilian and security-sector assistance in Lebanon and Colombia provides significant lessons for how future U.S. stabilization efforts should be implemented. The following are some of the key lessons that emerged from the two case studies.

ALIGNMENT OF STABILIZATION ASSISTANCE
Stabilization efforts should be based on a solid foundation of shared interests and end goals between the donor and recipient partner nations. They should also be aligned in a way that effectively addresses conflict drivers. The U.S. government’s own SAR framework emphasizes this principle. In practice, however, the misalignment on priorities and objectives between the United States and partner countries such as Lebanon and Colombia has led to breakdowns in the efficacy of stabilization efforts.

In Lebanon’s case, assistance from the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) continued to focus on important forced displacement-related and longer-term issues such as education, water, and sanitation at a time when there was an intensifying economic and political crisis. Rather than aligning its assistance to the emergent needs of the partner at the peak of anti-government protests, the U.S. government, in an unfortunate turn of events, temporarily halted security-sector assistance worth over $105 million to Lebanon, rendering its partnership with perhaps the most reliable entity in the country in jeopardy.

QUALITY OF U.S. COMMITMENT
In Lebanon and Colombia, the quality—more so than the high volume—of U.S. stabilization assistance has shown to be a critical factor in some relative success stories in the two countries. As the U.S. SAR framework emphasizes, addressing context-relevant and prioritized conflict drivers, not just with the central government but also at the community level with civic organizations and NGOs, has yielded more stabilization gains than merely increasing funds without executing assistance in a focused manner. In particular, complementing security assistance with programming focused on freedom of speech, human rights, and other issues has resulted in greater partner government accountability and legitimacy.

U.S. security-sector assistance to the LAF over the past decade has focused on professionalization and inculcating principles of human rights and protection of civilians. These efforts are reflected in the LAF’s relatively careful handling of recent protests, yielding significantly less violence than in nearby Iraq, for example. On the other hand, U.S. assistance and commitment to the ISF has lagged in comparison to the LAF, and that contrast is evident in the former’s less careful treatment of protestors, resulting in a heavily criticized spate of injuries and arrests.

COORDINATION BETWEEN DEFENSE AND DEVELOPMENT ASSISTANCE
A lack of coordination on the ground between U.S. security and civilian assistance—implemented by the Department of Defense (DoD) and USAID, respectively—has had negative implications on its stabilization programming in both Lebanon and Colombia, ranging from repetition of efforts to a lack of knowledge and clarity around the totality of U.S. efforts in the country to critical issues and vulnerable populations falling through the cracks. The SAR framework emphasizes the importance of aligning security and civilian assistance. This has resulted in stabilization efforts that, for example, overlook the need to establish a credible justice infrastructure in Colombia. The judiciary is critical to stability in a country recovering from drawn-out internal conflict involving powerful armed non-state actors, but U.S. resources have been focused instead on U.S. counternarcotics efforts. The lack of coordination between defense and development assistance also contributes to the uneven implementation of anti-corruption measures to improve governance within the country.
CONNECTING LONG-TERM AND SHORT-TERM GAINS
Stabilization efforts have to maintain a balance between addressing immediate critical needs and planning long-term initiatives for sustainable, locally led development and security programs, as noted by the SAR framework. However, in both Lebanon and Colombia, the connection between the short-term and long-term gains made through U.S. stabilization assistance is lacking, thus jeopardizing the overall stabilization effort.

In Colombia, for example, U.S. emphasis on counternarcotics priorities tend to be framed in a short time horizon and easily quantifiable terms to maximize demonstrable results, thereby achieving political goals and U.S. congressional metrics. Hectares of coca eradication translate into easily identifiable output metrics. However, this approach has tended to run counter to broader stabilization goals and programs that take longer to demonstrate success—not to mention measurable outcomes, which could mitigate the conflict drivers that facilitate support to counternarcotics networks in the first place. For example, broad and uncontextualized application of the aerial eradication program, deeply unpopular among local populations because of its damaging effects on civilian health and the environment, could actually reinforce negative perceptions of the Colombian national government within Colombia’s territories. It could reinforce local support for illicit groups and activities as the primary—and only—way of obtaining governance, economic, and security “services.” Instead, these U.S.-backed programs should focus on enabling alternative forms of economic livelihoods, legitimate security organizations, and accountable governance structures to displace illicit groups that rely on and maintain coca production.

THE CONCEPT OF “RESILIENCE”
U.S. stabilization efforts focus on empowering the partner country and garnering resilience within the partner government and the populace. In some cases, however, when the partner government may be perceived—rightly or wrongly—as the perpetrator of instability in the country, the traditional concept of stability or resilience could be considered negative by the population. For instance, Lebanese activists involved in the recent protest movement have stressed the significance of this point, warning of the implications of the United States being seen as perpetuating the power of the corrupt ruling elite, which includes the current Lebanese government. This perception of U.S. propagation of negative resilience could taint broader stabilization efforts in the country.

SAR PRINCIPLES AT PLAY
The U.S. government has not designated either Lebanon or Colombia as focus countries for implementation of the SAR framework. However, SAR principles provide a useful lens through which to assess the effectiveness and alignment of current U.S. policies and programming in addressing conflict drivers in countries facing current or future instability, such as Lebanon and Colombia.

STRATEGIC CRITERIA AND PRIORITIES
The SAR calls for establishing strategic engagement criteria and priorities to guide stabilization. In both Lebanon and Colombia, there were instances of uncoordinated or uneven criteria for what constituted priorities for engagement with partner country leaders at the national and local levels over at least the last five years. At times, senior leaders from Washington have prioritized Iran in the case of Lebanon and counternarcotics in the case of Colombia. In contrast, U.S. government leaders in the field have framed priorities for country engagement, and specifically on stabilization, keyed to priorities reflective of partner priorities and conflict dynamics. In Lebanon, framing policy and programming in anti-Iran terms during this delicate time feeds narratives that will play directly
into Iran and Hezbollah’s playbook. In Colombia, senior U.S. officials have prioritized aerial eradication to curb cocaine production, although Colombian local community leaders view this approach as counterproductive. Even if Lebanon and Colombia are not countries prioritized for stabilization, misalignment of engagement messaging and U.S.-partner policy priorities risks deepening conflict dynamics.

**DIVISION OF LABOR AND BURDEN SHARING**

The SAR notes the importance of the United States pursuing a purposeful division of labor and burden sharing with multilateral organizations while mobilizing other bilateral donors. In both Beirut and Bogotá, while some donor coordination fora exist, they are not always attended by the United States. In some cases, allied embassy and multilateral organizations had little to no contact with the U.S. embassy, despite the prominence of the U.S. role in both country contexts. This siloed approach risks duplication of engagement and resources, running contrary to the Trump administration’s call for greater burden sharing among allies or, worse still, competing or undermining shared political priorities through lack of sequenced policy and programs.

**LOCAL LEGITIMACY AND LEADSHIP**

The SAR rightly underscores the importance of creating conditions whereby locally legitimate authorities and systems can peaceably manage conflict. Clearly, in Lebanon at both the national and local level and in Colombia at the local level, there is a risk of prematurely providing certain types of assistance before there is a foundation of legitimate governance, appropriate anti-corruption controls, and basic security. As both the SAR and the U.S. Institute for Peace’s Task Force on Extremism in Fragile States report emphasize, security- and justice-sector assistance must be tailored so as not to exacerbate conflict dynamics. Additionally, U.S. diplomatic tools should be leveraged to help achieve these goals. The lack of locally legitimate, accountable justice and law enforcement leaders in both Colombia and Lebanon diminishes progress toward governance and security objectives, undermining U.S. policy goals to solidify the peace process and counternarcotics in Colombia and to bolster legitimate national institutions in Lebanon.

**DEFINING ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES**

The SAR clearly defines the roles and responsibilities of the major departments and agencies engaged in stabilization to improve performance and instill a unity of purpose. The Department of State (DoS) is designated as the overall lead for the country political strategy and stabilization efforts, USAID is intended to be the lead implementer for non-security stabilization assistance, and the DoD is a supporting element in providing security-related stabilization assistance for civilian-led efforts. Other U.S. government departments and agencies may also play roles in stabilization under this organizational rubric. While strong civilian and military programming exists in both Colombia and Lebanon, in neither context is there a clear view of how roles and responsibilities are defined, how they work together, or how efforts are coordinated. Diplomatic, development, and defense colleagues sitting in different offices in the same embassy had differing levels of access and freedom to operate in country, compounding the lack of synchronization and communication for combined planning and programming outside of top-level staff meetings, annual country strategy reviews, or crisis response mechanisms.

**FUNDING AND PROGRAMMING FLEXIBILITY**

The SAR emphasizes the need for flexible funding to enable sequenced, targeted approaches to stabilization. USAID’s Office of Transition Initiatives (OTI) stands out as an entity with exceptionally flexible tools compared to other programming in fluid environments. The OTI has the ability to deploy local U.S. government staff quickly to diagnose, adapt, and implement programming to address changing dynamics. Speed and flexibility may become even more critical in contested and competitive environments, where geopolitical rivals such as China, Russia, and Iran are typically able to deploy resources more quickly than the United States. In the case of Lebanon, USAID and the U.S. Congress should assess whether a new OTI program may be needed in Lebanon in light of the changing dynamics. USAID should also evaluate how to better synchronize planning and hand off between the OTI and other forms of stabilization or development programs to ensure implementation can be adaptive to future changes in complex environments. In addition, U.S. foreign assistance—including longer-term development programming—should be fluid and adaptive to partner contexts and evolving dynamics and also should be reassessed through conflict sensitivity lenses given that the current political and economic crises may have long-lasting effects. This is also true in the case of Colombia, where OTI does have current programming, but broadly also where distinct communities in territories require different approaches to civilian and security stabilization programming, depending on the mix of conflict drivers and distinct community factors involved. Of course, the balance...
of flexibility and appropriate controls and oversight must be fine-tuned and will be a key issue for the implementation of the 2019 Global Fragility Act.

**INSTITUTIONALIZING LEARNING, EVALUATION, AND ACCOUNTABILITY**

Finally, the SAR calls for institutionalizing learning, evaluation, and accountability in stabilization policy and programming. In Lebanon and Colombia, despite decades of U.S. political commitment and investment, the United States risks repeating prior mistakes. In Colombia, prior attempts to prioritize counternarcotics programs that diminished community input and leadership also failed to sustainably eradicate cocaine production, yet the United States seems to be turning back to this page of history in its current approach. In Lebanon, overemphasis on hard-nosed Iran-related objectives at the expense of broader political reform has put locally legitimate institutions such as the LAF in an untenable position of defending Lebanese sovereignty against a more politically and militarily-powerful Iranian-backed Lebanese Hezbollah. The United States risks repeating the same mistakes as it did in 2008, placing the weight of its engagement on countering Iran and Boltoning the LAF, which at that time prompted the sweep of Hezbollah into greater political power and territorial control. This allowed Hezbollah to neglect Lebanon’s systemic corruption, which provides it and similar groups a solid platform for its resistance movement and militia growth.

**THE BIGGER PICTURE: SYSTEMIC**

It is clear that SAR principles can carry broad relevance for other country contexts such as Lebanon and Colombia. The U.S. policy and practitioner communities also broadly recognize the overarching policy and programmatic shifts that need to occur to pursue effective and conflict-aware stabilization. However, systematic challenges impede progress in making these necessary shifts.

**MISALIGNED U.S., ALLIED, AND PARTNER PRIORITIES**

Stabilization policies and programming authorities set in Washington should allow for adaptability based on political shifts in partner and allied countries and in the United States. However, this is complicated due to the significant “scar tissue” left by past stabilization efforts in Iraq and Afghanistan. The U.S. officials who served under those efforts, and who may now be in leadership roles, may inadvertently solidify or perpetuate interagency structures based on their past experiences, which may not be appropriate or productive in all stabilization contexts. Partner and allied country priorities, timelines, and policies—such as those coming out of Washington—are constantly shifting along with the people assigned to implement them. In Lebanon, U.S. policy and programmatic focus on Iran’s destabilizing activities and Syria’s continued instability positioned the U.S. embassy in Beirut and its civilian and security-sector implementers in an important but narrow operating space; they had few tools to be adaptive to the rapidly changing context when the Lebanese protests unfolded and the government and economy foundered in the fall of 2019.

**RIGID STRUCTURES PREVENTING AGILITY AND CONFLICT SENSITIVITY**

Integrated and interagency approaches to governance, diplomacy, transitional justice, and security-sector assistance are critical in conflict-affected areas. Putting these approaches in place and executing them is not easy. Budgets for various offices within a U.S. mission come through “stove pipes” from different congressionally appropriated sources, often with little mandate and agility to coordinate—much less co-program—across agencies. U.S. personnel deploy on different timelines and are judged by different metrics. Security-sector assistance, particularly from DoD security cooperation programs, is not always developed in close concert with other elements of the U.S. mission.
with governance and transitional justice priorities and objectives in mind and may inadvertently work against them in practice. For example, the DoD has a strong relationship with the Colombian military, with clear benefits in partnered counternarcotics, counterterrorism, and humanitarian assistance operations. However, the DoD has little synchronization at the local level with USAID’s programming for community resilience, protection of human rights defenders, and creation of credible justice institutions to better address conflict drivers as they manifest in different ways across Colombia’s territories. Left unresolved, those conflict drivers contribute to security problems that the Colombian military then has to address. “Success” could look very different depending on where one sits.

**LACK OF GOVERNANCE AND ACCOUNTABILITY-RELATED CONDITIONALITY**

The U.S. government should ensure that conditionality is not assigned to humanitarian funding but is effectively guiding longer-term programming focusing on partner and—importantly—internal U.S. government accountability toward clearly stated outcomes. Though challenging, it is critical to hold the U.S. government and partners accountable, admit when desired outcomes are not reached, and then learn from these efforts in hopes of better design and execution the next time around. For example, donors should be willing to withdraw funding for governance programming in countries with little legitimacy at the national level if certain conditions on transparency and promised reforms are not met. USAID has already signaled its willingness to establish and enforce conditionality in Lebanon because of national-level malfeasance; its programming is now mainly concentrated at the regional and local levels. When and if reform ever comes to the Lebanese political system, the U.S. government should be willing to engage as long as established conditions for continued funding are met. Known as the “MCC effect,” the Millennium Challenge Corporation also uses the promise of future compact funding to reinforce its required governance principles and conditions. Conditionality on development programs—for the U.S. government and for partners—may not always be the appropriate tool to deploy to ensure accountability; however, it should at least be an available tool.

**PRIORITIZING STRATEGIC COMPETITION . . . COUNTERTERRORISM AND COUNTERNARCOTICS REDUX**

The U.S. government prioritizes competing with China, Russia, and Iran over stabilization, and U.S. policymakers are unable to create an integrated process or approach to address this reality in a clear-headed manner. When the United States delivers stabilization programming, it often chooses to prioritize more kinetic objectives (e.g., counterterrorism, counternarcotics) over stabilization goals rather than nesting them in a common approach. The result is often that these kinetic objectives, pursued independently of other objectives, inadvertently exacerbate conflict drivers. The United States runs the risk of falling into a similar trap by failing to take an integrated approach to achieving its strategic competition and stabilization objectives. This is most acute presently in the Lebanon case, where prioritizing counter-Iran objectives above all may actually undermine the ability to engage Shia or unaligned but coerced populations which could be critical to building an alternative model of governance that displaces Iranian influence over the long term. Additionally, partner and allied approaches to geostrategic competitors may differ, causing friction in relationships critical for burden sharing in stabilization contexts. Partners may feel that they have to make choices about their relationships with territorial neighbors such as Iran or Russia that put them in the difficult position of “choosing sides” versus the United States. This may be particularly tough on partners that lack confidence in enduring U.S. commitment to supporting them. Also, a focus solely on competition to “beat” competitors in the battlefield could lead to U.S. support to local partners that are effective fighters but broadly illegitimate in the eyes of the population. In addition, different U.S. departments and agencies may place more emphasis on strategic competition objectives than others, potentially resulting in blurred or inconsistent policy and partner perceptions of U.S. priorities.

**RECOMMENDATIONS FOR EFFECTIVE AND CONFLICT-AWARE STABILIZATION**

While the Colombia and Lebanon cases above offer useful examples of SAR principles at play, they also highlight key constraints and bureaucratic turf, historical “scar tissue,” and authorities-based obstacles to pursuing effective and conflict-aware stabilization that are relevant more broadly. To address these and other obstacles, the U.S. government should consider the following:
INTEGRATE STABILIZATION PRINCIPLES INTO REGIONAL STRATEGIES

• **Dismantle bureaucratic obstacles.** Bureaucratic obstacles often arise from a disconnect between functionally driven frameworks and region-specific strategies. The reality is that both are independently important and must be integrated to maximize effectiveness to meet U.S. foreign policy objectives. For example, while Lebanon and Colombia are not SAR focus countries and thus not part of the official U.S. government stabilization approach, the SAR framework remains relevant in both contexts; stabilization success there will require integrated interagency responses. Policy obstacles also arise when political administrations and priorities change within partner countries and in the United States. Enhanced interagency personnel training, co-prioritization efforts with the United States and the partner, and increased delegated authority to the U.S. chief of mission in country could help alleviate some of these policy-related obstacles. An empowered chief of mission could also deconflict existing tensions between functional and regional bureaus, setting higher-level priorities and assigning specific roles in pursuit of a common mission-wide objective set. Additionally, integrating functional frameworks such as the SAR with regional strategies will require commitment from the highest levels of the interagency with appropriate oversight by the U.S. Congress. It is for this reason that interagency combined planning and coordination is recommended by the SAR and mandated by the GFA.

• **Play off the same sheet of music.** Both regional strategies and stabilization frameworks must be anchored in shared priorities identified with locally legitimate authorities within the partner country and with other donors. Proceeding with stabilization without such buy-in risks undermining the entire effort. Progress is almost always predicated on the partner country’s leadership at the elite and local levels. In addition, closer coordination with other donors would enable the United States to more effectively achieve its goal of burden sharing.

• **Define objectives around “stability,” “fragility,” and “resilience” within the partner context.** Relatedly, U.S. policy concepts of “stability,” “fragility,” and “resilience,” and how they are translated into policy and programmatic objectives, must be tailored and filtered through the lens of how the partner country and their populations perceive them. In some cases, partner elites may be vested in the status quo and comfortable with “stability” and “resilience” objectives. In other cases, popular movements and local leaders in partner countries may resist these conceptions because they are tied to a corrupt, predatory, or outdated status quo. Resisting the status quo can also make partner contexts more “fragile” in the short term but could be necessary to achieve a more enduring “stability.” The United States will have to decide which approach to “stability,” “fragility,” and “resilience” will best meet its interests and values in a particular country context and how that must inform a political strategy for engaging the partner at the elite and local levels.

REFORM STRUCTURE AND PROCESSES

• **Leverage reforms and alternate avenues to battle policy rigidity.** The U.S. government does not always have the tools and flexibility it needs to react in every stabilization context. Recent reforms such as the SAR and GFA have shown that policymakers realize that structural rigidity can be counterproductive to achieving stabilization outcomes. However, these reforms will take time, because procedural rigidity is as much cultural as it is structural. Implementation of both the SAR and GFA will require sustained dedication and focus from senior policymakers, especially since it will depend on the organization whether to push principles to compel cultural change first or vice versa. The Stabilization Leaders Forum could be strengthened by including leadership from State-P and the NSC staff to increase political will for GFA and SAR reforms. It then could be an appropriate venue through which to bring oversight and rigor to coordination processes across donors and the United Nations and to ensure better alignment of strategic goals across stakeholder groups.

• **Institutionalize principles into planning processes.** In addition, the U.S. government has developed an internal framework for justice and security-sector reform to suggest—but not direct—principles to improve planning, design, and implementation of related policy and programs in conflict-sensitive ways. This guidance is aimed at reinforcing the directives of the public-facing SAR and the GFA but is not directly tied to action or implementation. Clear budgetary requirements could be built into the DoS, USAID, and DoD justice- and security-sector assistance processes that link to these principles and thus make them enforceable. The principles could also be included in
congressional notification requirements by armed services and foreign affairs committees.

CLOSE THE AUTHORITIES GAP

- **Set a strong collaborative foundation for new authorities.** The GFA authorizes a Complex Crises Fund, a Prevention and Stabilization Fund, and a Multi-Donor Global Fragility Fund. All of these—in different ways depending on the context—will be important to achieving stabilization objectives. These new funds all necessitate high-level U.S. leadership buy-in and require multiple parts of the U.S. government to plan, fund, and operationalize efforts according to agreed and congressionally mandated timelines. These funds were included in the GFA as a reflection of stakeholders—including the authors of this policy brief—calling for a review of stabilization authorities; as such, it is important that all appropriate “timelines are met and authorization matches timelines and appropriations.”

- **Create flexible and agile authorities like USAID’s OTI.** As evidenced by the Lebanon and Colombia cases and as highlighted by the SAR, the ability to act quickly and decisively in conflict and contested environments depends upon being able to access agile funding using authorities such as the ones available to USAID’s OTI. Given critical gaps in justice, governance, and institutional security capacity-building programs in these contexts, the U.S. government interagency would be better able to respond effectively and in a more conflict-aware fashion if it had other OTI-like options for responding and being proactive. Such tools would require effective planning, oversight, monitoring, and evaluation to ensure they are not abused and could sustain legislative support.

COVID-19 AND STABILIZATION

The Covid-19 pandemic is demonstrating the importance of a resilience- and conflict-aware approach to stabilization. Pandemic-related authorities, programming, and funding in stabilization contexts must be particularly flexible and adaptive to new realities, challenges, vulnerabilities, and opportunities. Implementers and policymakers must recognize that pandemic relief and recovery efforts may subdue or, in certain cases (e.g., human mobility and global inequality), exacerbate existing conflict drivers. Much like in stabilization contexts, U.S. officials must take a whole-of-government approach to addressing Covid-19-related challenges. Depending on the duration of the Covid-19 crisis, both civilian and military U.S. personnel may be limited in their access and readiness to support stabilization-related programming in the field. Nonetheless, many of the SAR principles mentioned here are relevant and could provide important frameworks through with such an approach could be executed.

REASSESS PERSONNEL AND RESOURCE NEEDS AND EXPECTATIONS

- **Augment the U.S. stabilization workforce in the field.** Embassy missions do not always have the in-house technical expertise or staff capacity to conduct strategic-level monitoring and evaluation that connects programmatic results to U.S. strategy for the country. In addition, each embassy conducting stabilization should have a coordinator of all civilian stabilization programs. It is important for the U.S. government to provide auxiliary support as requested via the DoS/CSO, USAID, or other appropriate providers of expertise.

- **Normalize forward deployment of civilians and expeditionary diplomacy.** Freedom of movement off the embassy compound and outside of the capital is vital in conflict-affected countries and instrumental to diplomats and development professionals being able to effectively do their jobs. While security precautions to ensure U.S. personnel are protected are necessary, opportunities to embed with U.S., allied, and partner militaries and to repeatedly visit conflict areas should be normalized in order to engage, plan, assess, and evaluate stabilization goals and programming with local partners. This will require a cultural shift in risk tolerance in Washington and in the field.

- **Institutionalize principle-based structures and procedures.** Since many field-based U.S. government personnel in stabilization contexts rotate in and out
at regular intervals, it is important for political and
diplomatic leadership to ensure that established
principle-based structures and procedures survive
rotations. Specifically, this should include formal
and informal feedback loops within the embassy,
Washington, and allied and multilateral donors, and
with implementers, to share information and strategies
for adapting U.S. policies and programming to the
dynamic environment.

• **Mandate conflict sensitivity training.** Finally, all
foreign service officers, civilian and military personnel,
and program managers and implementers serving
in conflict-affected countries should be required to
receive conflict sensitivity training prior to arriving in
country to better understand the two-way interactions
between U.S. policies and programming and the
conflict context.

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