

# The Institute for Stabilization and Transition

*Finding solutions to global challenges for policy-makers, practitioners, educators and media*

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## REMARKS

Delivered to La Club de La Presse Niamey, Niger

No. 3 | January 29, 2014

### International Stabilization Missions & the Media

*Max Primorac*

I want to thank the *Club de la Press Niamey* for organizing this important workshop and I am very honored to participate. I also want to thank the US Embassy for sponsoring my trip and to the EUCAP for its support.

I was asked to say a few words about international stabilization missions and the role media plays in it based on my experience in several stabilization efforts in other parts of the world. First, it is important to understand what it is. Peacekeeping or peacemaking, depending on the United Nations mandate, creates the security space within which stabilization can begin. Stabilization is an integrated civilian-military and unified effort to strengthen a country's ability to defend itself and pursue long term development. Neither goal is possible without winning the allegiance of the people.

For decades, efforts to end and prevent conflicts in other countries have been a permanent feature of US and European foreign policies. These efforts have expanded with the growing threat of trans-national terror and criminal groups. Since 1993, the United States has responded to 28 foreign internal conflicts and over 50 humanitarian crises every year.

Despite many difficulties, on balance the record is good. A study by the Rand Corporation of stabilization efforts in twenty countries found that such missions were mostly followed by "improved security, greater enjoyment of political rights and civil liberties, high levels of national income and improved human development and government effectiveness."

But why does the international community spend billions of dollars to stabilize other countries? How does the international community benefit? What are we trying to achieve and why?

Of course, there is the human moral impulse to help others in need. But it is also about self-interest. In all cases around the world, from Kosovo in Europe, Iraq in the Middle East, Afghanistan in Asia, El Salvador in Central America or Mali in the Sahel – the principles underlying each stabilization mission is always two fold: building the security capabilities of countries under threat and strengthening their democratic institutions; with security and democracy reinforcing each other.

For the United States, the terrorist attack on September 11, 2001 and in other countries thereafter, made it clear that traditional diplomacy of relying on dictatorships to keep us safe was flawed. Dictatorships create the political swamp within which extremism flourishes, spreads across borders and threatens all of us. Standing by as countries collapse into chaos, such as Afghanistan did during the 1990s, provides the sanctuary transnational criminals misuse to launch attacks elsewhere.

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Conversely, it is historical fact that democracies do not wage war upon one another. Stabilization, with its goals of promoting security and democracy, is believed to be the most effective antidote to political extremism and, as such, offers the best prospects for protecting our homeland in the long term.

Hence the objective of addressing the root causes that make countries weak, a weakness that permits terrorists to establish safe havens for their operations. In most countries the root cause for state weakness is their institutional inability and lack of public legitimacy to peacefully resolve internal ethnic and sectarian divisions. Elections, rule of law, civil society, independent media, capacity building, and free market reform are the practical tools through which such tensions can be credibly resolved and past grievances effectively addressed.

Unlike authoritarian regimes, democracy is not a winner-take-all system. Everyone can win something and therefore have something of value to lose by opting out. Compare South Africa to Zimbabwe, Lebanon to Syria or Czechoslovakia to Yugoslavia – the political path chosen by a country matters.

But stabilization missions succeed only as a compact among all parties: a compact between the host country and international community; between the host government and its citizens, and between the international community and the citizens being helped. This broad and necessary partnership is only as strong as the trust that binds these relationships. The mission must be seen as legitimate by the public. If the mission loses legitimacy then citizens will not support their own government against the extremists or take the risks inherent in actively participating in the rebuilding of their country. Without this binding trust the mission will fail.

And building trust and public confidence in the mission requires an active and constant national conversation about what are the needs of the people and if these needs are being reasonably met, the direction the country is taking, and whether their government is keeping their promises of reform.

For this the role of media is critical. The media provides the public space within which citizens voice their needs and concerns and are heard by their government. The media provides avenues to express public opinions, frustrations and hopes that can act as pressure points in favor of genuine reform. They inform and educate the public on national goals and projects. They help manage public expectations, shed light on corruption and waste, and force the kind of transparency and accountability that catalyzes transformative change. And they promote dialogue between different groups that otherwise have few opportunities to communicate.

But media can also deepen divisions by promoting hatred as they did in former Yugoslavia, or deepen sectarian suspicion by spreading false rumors as they do in Iraq. Or, they can become paid vehicles for political propaganda, disinforming instead of informing the public. Here we must speak about the special role played by independent media associations in setting codes of ethics and conduct of professional journalism.

Local media has the duty to ask how international funds are being expended, whether these are being managed effectively and how these programs will bring tangible benefits to the people, how and when.

So, how well has the international community done in other countries? While the overall record is positive it should be better. In too many places, in Iraq, Afghanistan, Bosnia-Herzegovina, for example, substantial amounts of money have been spent to support political, economic and public administration reform resulting in poor government performance. In my experience, there are two major reasons for that.

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First is security. Violence is the greatest threat to stability. Absent a safe environment to work, government services cannot be delivered, international programs cannot be implemented, schools, health clinics, roads and other basic infrastructure cannot be built. Violence discourages investments needed to create jobs and generate national wealth. The country becomes drained of its human capital as people leave in search of a better life elsewhere, never to return. Security is therefore the precondition for all stabilization missions.

A second reason is the lack of political will to implement reform, reforms needed to consolidate security gains. Stabilization missions are designed to help host countries reach a point of stability and security, of self-reliance, especially if they are endowed with natural resources to finance future development.

If visa rules are too strict, obtaining licenses an administrative nightmare or if there is a culture of corruption, foreign investors will stay away. Farmers and businessmen will not risk their limited capital or labor if they face punitive taxes and suffocating regulations. Host governments must apply the training and technical assistance they receive from the international community to improve the delivery of public services. Government officials must make a radical mental shift that views themselves as regulators and facilitators, not as drivers of economic growth. That role belongs to the private sector. Again, the role of media is critical in shedding light on the government's performance on political and economic reforms and on the effectiveness of the international community in supporting those reforms.

To conclude, I would like to share with you a few more lessons learned from other stabilization efforts.

1. Civilian and security programs must be fully coordinated. If, for example, the Ministry of Finance is not paying salaries of policemen, they will leave their posts. If the police are not ensuring a safe environment, public services cannot be delivered to the people. It is all connected.

2. Building institutions of government is critical if countries are to defend themselves and promote long term development. We must measure progress not in terms of how much money is spent, how many people are trained or the number of conferences held. These are inputs. What matters are outcomes and all this time, risk and investment is designed to make ministries more effective, NGOs more active and media more professional.

3. Lastly, and as I mentioned earlier, the public must have a shared understanding of the goals of stabilization and, ultimately, it is the people that will decide if the stabilization initiative succeeds or fails. And it is the media that determines whether the public has the tools and knowledge it needs in order to make that decision wisely.

Thank you for giving me an opportunity to speak about this important topic. I welcome your comments and questions.

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