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REMARKS

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Restoring Our Civilian-Military Stabilization Capability to Counter Terrorist Threats in the Middle East¹

by Max Primorac

As we have just heard, the political landscape in the Middle East and North Africa is in violent disarray with terrorist groups, led by ISIL, proliferating and strengthening their position while international coalition efforts to “degrade and destroy” them in Iraq and Syria appear increasingly insufficient. As the months pass, though, the political vulnerability of the region’s fragile states is increasing and requiring ever more resources to stabilize. Meanwhile, direct threats to our own respective homelands have become very real and these threats generate a palpable mood of foreboding back home.

In diplomatic and foreign policy circles there is a sobering realization that the large-scale international interventions of past years might be required again, no matter how politically unpopular. This is as good a time and place as any to revisit this new-old reality. In doing so, I will draw from my own personal experiences working stabilization missions in the Balkans, Iraq and Afghanistan and, based on that experience, respond to the challenge our conference organizers have presented to us, namely to identify “specific civilian instruments” that will strengthen transatlantic cooperation in stemming the tide of threats emanating from the region.

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To start, let me assume, not so unrealistically, that the Assad regime in Syria suddenly collapses, possibly through assassination, military coup, defeat on the battlefield or from pure exhaustion. What happens then? Who will replace Assad and by what method? Who will shape the political landscape? Will it be the West or will we defer to other regional players? How will a successor regime govern when Syria’s infrastructure is destroyed, its civil society atomized, millions of its people displaced

and with no money at hand? We are all aware that Syria will need massive reconstruction and humanitarian aid. But who will provide that aid and through what mechanisms will such aid be delivered? And what would a replacement government look like? Under such extreme conditions it is highly improbable that a moderate and democratic alternative will emerge on its own. This future scenario is not limited to Syria as it represents a real prospect for other fragile states in the region, with Libya and Yemen immediately coming to mind.

Would the West continue to circumscribe its engagement as one extremist regime replaces another setting the stage for the launching of terrorist attacks against our countries? Or would the transatlantic alliance find the collective fortitude to launch another civilian-military, state-building mission to help moderates take power and

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rebuild a devastated country along democratic norms? The costs of such international engagement would be high, the dangers many with no certainty of success, though I believe it is clear that the longer we wait to act the starker are our policy options. So, putting political will aside for the moment, are Western governments institutionally up to such a challenge?

I believe the answer is “no.” The civilian-military apparatus the transatlantic alliance developed during the surge campaigns in Iraq and Afghanistan over the past decade have lapsed, as have their attendant inter-agency mechanisms for joint training, planning, policy and operational coordination. The Pentagon has severely cut back its stability operations capability as a result of deep cuts in defense spending while the US strategically shifts its attentions to Asia, stressing naval over army (and therefore stabilization) investments. Meanwhile, the State Department may dissolve its under-performing Bureau of Conflict & Stabilization Operations. I would bet that Europe too has witnessed similar institutional disinvestments.

But if our respective governments are to successfully confront these threats in the worst case scenario of another large-scale international intervention and be in a strong position to advance democratic alternatives, it is imperative that they have the institutional means to do so. I would argue, therefore, that this calls for revitalizing what remains of our collective civilian-military stabilization capabilities and reviving those elements of it that proved critical and effective in the past. I believe that the failure to start doing this now would essentially cede to the extremists the power vacuum that inexorably results from a collapsed state, as is obviously happening in Syria with the rise of ISIL and other terrorist groups.

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Fortunately, it is not a matter of having to start from scratch as the expertise, experience and individual know-how remain in the US, UK, Italy, Netherlands and other Nato members, capabilities gained from missions in Afghanistan and Iraq, especially through participation in the multinational Provincial Reconstruction Teams that were established to extend our influence into the provinces. In sum, restoring this institutional architecture is principally a political decision and is not, in and of itself, costly to effect.

Now, I would like to briefly enumerate just a few key elements of what that revitalized stabilization capacity would look like, though this should be considered an incomplete inventory.

- First, we need to deepen inter-agency collaboration between our diplomats and commanders. This can be done by increasing the number of departmental exchanges, such as adding more Political Advisers and vice versa, and reinstating previous joint trainings and planning exercises that characterized the surge years. Conducting joint training, planning and operational exercises prior to field deployments will ensure more cohesive civilian-military effectiveness in the next intervention mission.
- Second, we should re-examine the PRT model as a proven way of projecting our collective reach and power into the provinces where we can more ably prevent extremists from regrouping and ensure that moderates there are well integrated into the reconstruction and democratic process.
- Next, our respective militaries should channel more resources into their civil affairs units. In the immediate aftermath of military operations when security conditions do not yet permit civilians to perform their humanitarian and reconstruction work, during this very unstable but critical interim period, civil affairs officers are crucial in setting a firm base for transition, identifying genuine community leaders and emerging opportunities for civil society development.

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- We must make foreign aid a more effective tool of foreign policy. Aid is not charity but ought to be treated as a powerful tool to translate strategy and policy goals into achievable end states. There are simply too many reports of waste, corruption and a failure to effect the political and economic reforms necessary to consolidate democratic change. We must get out of the unproductive habit of measuring our success by how much money we spend – euphemistically referred to as “burn rate --” or how many people we train and, instead, focus on achieving real and lasting reform **outcomes**.
- And, we need to be much better at international donor coordination to ensure our respective foreign aid programs complement rather than conflict with each other. Donor coordination mechanisms can also serve as a platform to build strong consensus for zero tolerance of corruption as corruption represents the greatest threat to the legitimacy and consolidation of the democratic process.
- Lastly, we need to significantly ramp up our democracy aid programs that have been slashed over the past six years so that we can credibly strengthen moderate forces in the region and positively shape its political landscape. Tied to that we must simultaneously launch robust public diplomacy campaigns advocating democratic values as universal values.

There are other elements to revitalizing our collective civilian-military stabilization capabilities but this short list would be a good start.

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In conclusion, let me add how important, how critical, it is that we constantly be mindful that extremists often win simply by walking into the political vacuum that we in the West willfully choose to leave behind. It is time for the transatlantic alliance to fill the political vacuum and do so wholeheartedly and unapologetically.

Thank you.

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