

International Stability Operations Association

White Paper

Stabilization Assistance Review (SAR)

October 2018

The Stabilization Assistance Review (SAR), published in May 2018, is a joint framework document signed by Department of State (DOS), Department of Defense (DoD), and the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID). The SAR is a White House initiative that sets the groundwork for future policy and legislation regarding all stabilization activities. The SAR directs that all stabilization focuses on specific countries that have a vital U.S. national interest to ensure that all foreign aid dedicated to stabilization has an immediate and measurable payoff in terms of U.S. diplomatic and national security objectives. Notable for ISOA members is that private sector companies—contractors and implementers—supporting these stabilization activities all over the world are not mentioned in the SAR¹ and it is unclear what, if any, changes member companies should make to best support.

This unfortunate fact aside, ISOA believes that the SAR takes a number of positive steps to ensure the success of U.S. stabilization operations. First and foremost, the SAR directs that stabilization operations and activities be understood as essentially *political*, the main purpose of which is to “create conditions where locally legitimate authorities and systems can peaceably manage conflict and prevent violence.”² The SAR also establishes a clear chain of command with DOS as the overall lead with the USAID as the supporting agency for development, and DoD as the supporting agency for security and logistics.

In addition, all three agencies are directed to work together toward more financially responsible and politically accountable stability operations aimed at advancing the United State’s top foreign politic priorities. The SAR directs that attention be paid to the effective and efficient use of bureaucratic functions and resources regarding this mission, to include finding ways to measure effectiveness in real time and ensuring U.S. political objectives are achieved.

Though SAR initiatives would be applied globally, sixteen countries are designated for immediate focus: Mali, Libya, Nigeria, Cameroon, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Somalia, Sudan, South Sudan, Yemen, Syria, Iraq, Ukraine, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Myanmar, and the Philippines.

¹ The phrase “private sector” is used several times, always in the context of private sector investment opportunities, such as major infrastructure projects; e.g., dams, bridges, and power plants. Contractors and implementers are not given a role in the SAR though they assist the U.S government in stabilization activities throughout the world, and even outnumber our troops 3 to 1 in dangerous conflict zones such as Afghanistan.

² “Stabilization Assistance Review: A Framework for Maximizing the Effectiveness of U.S. Government Efforts to Stabilize Conflict Affected Areas,” March 2018.

To achieve our national security goals in a fiscally responsible manner, the SAR recommends: (1) establish a U.S.-Government wide definition of stabilization that is distinct from humanitarian assistance and longer term development; (2) develop and evaluate political strategies based on evidence and rigorous analysis; (3) promote a fair, purposeful division of labor with national partners and international donors; (4) clarify agency roles and responsibilities to improve performance and reduce duplication; (5) improve the capacity of our civilian workforce to address stabilization needs in tandem with the U.S. military and partner forces; and (6) sequence and target our assistance to conflict-affected areas in a more measured fashion.

The SAR strategy document is being viewed as a good first step for future stabilization missions; however, challenges remain. First, the SAR intends for stabilization to be viewed as a relatively short-term activity—between two and five years. Although Congress does not have an appetite for funding longer operations, many believe this time-frame may be too short to have a truly stabilizing effect, as many of the nations targeted need to go through fundamental political and even cultural change.

Second, tracking progress toward political and cultural change, while making a determination about the level of success reached at any specific timeframe will not be easy. For one thing, what counts as “success” requires appealing to non-traditional metrics—both qualitative and quantitative. We know from years of experience with stabilization operations in Iraq and Afghanistan that simply counting the number of police trained or court houses erected does not accurately reflect the state of security or progress toward establishing rule of law. In fact, experts now recognize that it is often only the second and third order effects, such as the number of feral dogs in the streets or citizens who voluntarily respect traffic laws, that point toward accurate success indicators. More problematically, tracking inchoate qualitative metrics, such as the population’s general sense of well-being, are often the only route to honest assessment. The SAR’s goal of requiring continual alignment of operations with immediate political goals, adds yet another level of difficulty, as stabilization operations often need to continue across multiple U.S. government administrations and year-to-year fiscal constraints to be successful.

Most problematic, however, is the perennial, thorny issue of interagency cooperation. The culture gap between these agencies—DOS, USAID and DoD—is wide and well-known. Though each plays a valuable role in stabilization, the SAR directs that all three agencies change their processes. DOS and USAID have always taken the long view of stabilization, a time-frame that the SAR reigns in. DoD, on the other hand, moves quickly, but its short-term operational goals may not directly contribute to the broader political mission. To be SAR compliant, each needs to change its operational outlook and learn to synchronize efforts. Without robust encouragement, specifically the right funding streams, getting these titans to fully accommodate each other may

be a bridge too far.³ Congress has yet to provide the legal authority and monies experts believe are necessary for success.⁴

Despite these concerns, and the lack of a specific role framed for contractors in support of stability operations, ISOA believes the SAR is a positive step forward. ISOA would like to thank all three signatory agencies—the Department of Defense, the Department of State, and the United States Agency for International Development—for their efforts and for the opportunity to discuss the SAR with them one-on-one. ISOA, on behalf of our member companies, stands ready to assist the agencies in the implementation of SAR directives as appropriate and assist the agencies with future legislation regarding stabilization.

³ See, for example, E.R. Klein, “Bridging the Potomac,” *Small Wars Journal*, March 2013.

⁴ Legislative proposal SASC 1264, Department of Defense support for stabilization activities in national security interest of the United States, if accepted, would have authorized the Secretary of Defense to conduct small-scale and transitional stabilization activities, as provide logistical support to all stabilization efforts. Reasons for its lack of support from Congress were numerous and varied. Some officials believe similar legislation may be soon introduced. ISOA has offered DoD, DOS, and USAID their assistance if/when stability activities legislation is reconsidered.