

Imagining Assistance: Tales from the American Aid Experience in Iraq in 2006 and Pakistan in 2011

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ABOUT THE RECONSTITUTING LOCAL ORDERS PROJECT

The present disorder in the international system is greatly augmented by the breakdown of domestic order across a number of key states. Around the globe, the politics of identity, ideology, and religion are producing highly polarized societies and deepening conflicts among non-state actors and the state. In the Middle East, the Arab Spring disrupted long calcified political systems in ways that are still producing unpredictable effects on the regional order. The collapse of political order in Libya has wide-ranging consequences for governance across the Sahel, intensifying Mali and Nigeria's fragility and highlighting the many deficiencies of their states. Meanwhile, Russia's annexation of Crimea was facilitated by a breakdown of political order in Ukraine, and Russia's aggressive external posture also partially reflects and compensates for its internal weaknesses. But even rising powers such as India and Brazil face profound and persistent governance problems, including in public safety and rule of law.

The Brookings Seminar on Reconstituting Local Orders seeks to better understand how domestic political order breaks down and reconstitutes itself, and draw out the policy implications, by bringing together a select group of experts and policymakers for three private discussions featuring Brookings scholars, as well as guest speakers:

1. (Construction of Institutions and Counter-Institutions in the Middle East and South Asia
2. Mind the Gap (in the State): External Interveners and Local Militias
3. Rule on the Mean Streets and in the Mean Prisons: Slums, Gangs, and Cartels)

The Seminar will establish a collaborative research space that can serve as a launching pad for cutting edge research around questions of local and transnational order. It will promote a focused discussion on how political and social orders reconstitute themselves, what roles the international community might play, and what the impact this produces on regional order and the international system. Additionally, the Seminar will produce four papers, as well as associated secondary publications, that will focus on cross-regional comparisons to identify essential insights useful for policy makers as they consider when and how to support the rebuilding of local orders.

The Seminar will be led by Brookings Senior Fellows Vanda Felbab-Brown, Shadi Hamid, and Harold Trinkunas.

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For more than a decade, government assistance to Afghanistan, Iraq, and Pakistan (the so-called AIP countries) has dominated United States aid efforts. And nowhere have the results of these billions of dollars of expenditure been so hard to measure and the impact of such effort so elusive. As the examples below illustrate, American institutions and mind-sets found it extraordinarily difficult to adjust to aid in unsafe places.

For the U.S. government, the unusual experiences of the AIP countries may be an anomaly. If, as many hope, we are no longer involved in major conflicts or conflict areas in these ways, we may be able to go back to a less overheated, less politicized kind of assistance that may be quieter and more effective. But a note of caution: my United States Agency for International Development (USAID) friends who romanticize the old days when they were engineers and social workers out among foreign friends should remember that even the one-size-fits-all assistance of the 20th century was not always a big success. Therefore, it's time for a very hard look at the way we organize assistance: it's one thing to measure our commitment to a cause (peace in Sri Lanka or public health in Ghana) by how much we spend, and quite another to figure out how to do it right.

I draw on my experience as the head of the Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT) in Mosul, Iraq in 2006 and as Ambassador of the U.S. to Pakistan in Islamabad in 2011. What follows is less a systematic assessment than a description of U.S. reconstruction and state-building, from which we may find lessons to consider in the future. Both of these experiences were, in a sense, “start-ups”: later work by PRTs throughout Iraq doubtless learned from our mistakes and misconceptions in 2006, and the final implementation of projects

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in Pakistan doubtless benefited from our experiences in the early days of Kerry-Lugar-Berman applications.¹ But should we choose again to engage in major assistance projects in war zones, the process is certainly going to be difficult.

(Post) War Reconstruction in Iraq

Few Useful Guidelines from Headquarters

In the conscious effort to rebuild Iraq after 2003, people chosen (or self-selected) for the task were essentially engineers. Most of them were soldiers or systems analysts. To create structure for their efforts, they created Lines of Operation (which the military calls LOOs): this unit for governance, that unit for infrastructure, another for rule of law, created less from a careful assessment of social and cultural realities than from a precept that such elements were necessary for Iraq to become a successful state. By 2006, when I went to Mosul as the first leader of the first PRT, the American civilian and military authorities in Baghdad had learned, quite painfully, that the post-conflict situation would not correct itself, that it would not somehow come to an equilibrium that had been absent under Saddam Hussein—an equilibrium that needed only to be liberated from his distortions, in other words. Perhaps too many U.S. leaders had chosen to see 1989 as the proper analogy: the crowds jingled their keys on Wenceslas Square in Prague, Czechoslovakia in the evening, and yet returned to their desks at the Agriculture Ministry the next day. For a number of reasons, the crowds in Iraq did not respond this way.

The Defense Department’s Office of Reconstruction and Humanitarian Assistance (ORHA) had prepared for a situation in which U.S. assistance would focus on emergency relief rather than the building of institutions. This was the office that came into Baghdad on the heels of the U.S. Army, only to be sidelined by the Coalition Provisional Authority and quickly disbanded. Once it became clear in 2004 and 2005 that Iraq was falling into disarray, a new mantra emerged that a vision of a well-ordered society needed to be imposed. The new imposition of order by the invading power called for the creation of LOOs, conceived by and implemented with the resources and dedication of the U.S. military.

¹ The Kerry-Lugar-Berman legislation, passed in 2009, was a bipartisan bill that authorized \$7.5 billion dollars over five years for civilian assistance to Pakistan. It was a bipartisan attempt on the Hill to demonstrate sustained American commitment to democracy, stability, and prosperity in Pakistan with the return of post-Pervez Musharraf democratic leadership.

Meanwhile, at the U.S. embassy, a section called the Iraqi Reconstruction Management Office (IRMO) was created in 2004. This office supervised the PRTs that ultimately were created at the end of 2005 to achieve two goals: to decentralize assistance to the provincial level and thus bring it closer to the people, and to transfer the burden of assistance from soldiers to civilians—more specifically, from the Multinational Force in Iraq (MNF-I) to the Department of State. The first four PRTs were created in Mosul, Hillah, Kirkuk, and Basra. IRMO was an office of contractors at the Embassy that was long on advice and short on funds. And that advice was essentially responsive to bureaucratic needs: for example, finding out which streams of money (most of it Defense-managed) might be available, with complex provenances like the Iraq Relief and Reconstruction Fund or the Economic Support Fund (IRRF and ESF)—streams of funding whose made-in-Washington assumptions dominated plans for implementation in Iraq. So when I arrived in Mosul in January 2006, I was given a set of slides describing the flow of the Defense Department’s money and the Embassy’s structure, both of which had very little to do with the problems of Ninewa, the province for which my PRT was responsible.

Motivated but Unsuitable Personnel

Very quickly, I created structures in the Mosul PRT that were based on who was there rather than what the province needed. I had been assigned about 50 personnel, half of whom were military. Most of the soldiers were Civil Affairs (CA) officers, essentially members of the Army National Guard whose task was to deal with governments rather than fight wars. Few of these CA individuals were experts, but all were creative and enthusiastic. One soldier who was, in real life, a bank teller, became our microfinance expert; a major who at home was a veterinarian supervised our public health programs. Halfway through my tenure at Mosul, the CA team rotated out, replaced by two dozen Navy submariners who apparently were available to help. But we never did find weapons of mass destruction in Iraq, so I didn’t have to deploy these nuclear engineers on nuclear projects in Mosul—or rather, I did deploy them, but as microfinance and public health experts. I was also assigned an extraordinarily talented officer from the Army Corps of Engineers (ACE), whose sole job was to oversee contracting in certain areas designated by funding streams rather than by need.

Among the civilians I had contractors such as the former manager of a regional airport in North Carolina. The Department of Justice (DOJ) provided

a public prosecutor from Texas. USAID provided an official whose job was not development but to follow blueprints from that agency's headquarters in Baghdad. And there were a handful of diplomats, who, like the Civil Affairs soldiers, were smart and eager but untrained. Among them was a former executive at FedEx who rapidly became our top governance expert. We quickly created LOOs: our FedEx veteran immediately engaged with the Provincial Governor's office, bringing computers, discussing inclusiveness at meetings, and planning elections. I saw the computers on desks, but never saw them in use. Nor, in fact, did I ever get proof that repeated exhortations on the efficacy of agendas and minutes in Provincial Council meetings ever resulted in records of decisions. One Iraqi official noted to me in an aside, "Why should we write down our decisions? Doesn't that limit our flexibility to adjust if our decisions are wrong?"

Our DOJ lawyer was so adept at working his rule of law agenda that he repeatedly topped the weekly list of personalized death threats intercepted from the cell phones of militants. He not only worked with judges and prosecutors but also began regular trips to the largest correctional facility in Northern Iraq near Mosul Dam (these were the immediate post-Abu Ghraib days). Unfortunately, he had to negotiate carefully with the U.S. military's extensive police-training programs, which were run out of Baghdad. That was another funding stream; and there was also International Narcotics Control and Law Enforcement, a police training fund that our USAID representative was responsible for. We created an infrastructure development office, with the ACE and the airport expert. And there was a team devoted to economic development and job creation, run by an Army major (and after her, a Navy captain) working with USAID in those instances where the Baghdad USAID office believed that the Mosul PRT's projects were consistent with the USAID blueprint for the entire country.

After the destruction of the Golden Mosque in Samarra in February of 2006, things became rough: security deteriorated, and it was quite dangerous to venture outside the Forward Operating Base (FOB). Just going "over the wire" to visit with economic partners, social workers, experts, and elected officials (not to mention the local sheikhs who ran the countryside and the local Kurdish political party machine that ran much of the city) was difficult. Too often members of the PRT became "fobbits," out of touch with the projects they sought to oversee.

CERP, “the crack cocaine of assistance”

In 2003 the U.S. military had created a program called Commander’s Emergency Response Program (CERP). CERP provided infantry officers with significant funds that could be used very flexibly in order to achieve tactical goals. For example, to pacify a rural region, a captain could give money to a sheikh to build a road, providing jobs (and repairing infrastructure). Yet it was not always clear how the CERP money was actually disbursed and what security and economic effects it achieved. Many of the infantry officers themselves acknowledged to me that CERP money could be seen as a bribe to dissuade potential enemies from attacking us. Other programs were well-meaning: CERP funds paid for innumerable trash pickup and other environmental programs, so that some public squares in the Ninewa plains might be scrubbed for a couple of weeks before reverting to normal neglect. One brigade commander referred to CERP as crack cocaine, a weapon in the fight against insurgents but a habit that had its drawbacks: once a local Iraqi leader had experienced the rush of CERP money, he often wanted more. The military commander in Mosul—the Deputy Division Commander of the 101st Airborne—fought against this purely tactical use of CERP, and sought tirelessly to coordinate its use with the application of other assistance plans to make military actions consistent with PRT efforts—something I admired and very much appreciated. But with mortar fire raining down on us every night, and brutal battles in towns like Tal Afar occurring every day, his primary focus was rightly security rather than development.

There are other examples of the truly heroic efforts by those involved in what we referred to as “implementing the Marshall Plan in 1943.” But the most important points are these: the undergrowth of our own bureaucratic structure prevented us from gaining a sophisticated understanding of our surroundings. Members of the PRT came and left after a few months, without passing on their hard-obtained knowledge. Local authorities quickly realized that the PRT had neither the money nor the firepower of the brigade commanders. And most of all, our guiding principles were still the creation of a kind of constitutional framework where political leaders, police, courts, businesspeople, and citizens would have institutions familiar to Americans, institutions that would work as we knew how to make them work. Applying this to a traumatized city split between Sunni Arabs and Kurds, in a province which, at that time, was extraordinarily diverse, with

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Shia, Christian, Yazidi, Turkmen, and countless other nationalities, was an exercise in institutional insensitivity, no matter how well individuals among us spoke Arabic or understood the region's history.

There was, at that time, no centralized record-keeping; I gamely kept stacks of paper files that I left for my successor, but had no idea whether IRMO in Baghdad or any other coordinating authority assessed my experience. I imagine this improved over time: during my tenure in Mosul our entire communications switched over to a Defense Department system (even though we were an Embassy office), and I suspect much information was lost in the shuffle.

Crisis and Assistance in Pakistan

Great Expectations

I arrived in Pakistan in 2010 at a time of great hope for U.S.-Pakistani relations. Democracy had returned in 2008, and even with the tragic assassination of Benazir Bhutto, the frontrunner for the presidency, optimists in Islamabad and Washington believed that a new relationship might be built. The aforementioned Kerry-Lugar-Berman legislation was an attempt to create a long-term basis for U.S. support of civilian rule and economic prosperity: starting in 2009, it provided \$1.5 billion yearly for five years to bolster the new civilian leadership (even as our \$2 billion yearly military assistance continued, in the fight to root out the terrorists in the tribal areas bordering Afghanistan).

More Is Better, Or Is It?

My predecessor in Islamabad had appointed a senior Foreign Service officer to oversee assistance, as the USAID mission had expanded rapidly—hundreds of new officers and staff had joined in the year prior to my arrival. This, in fact, paralleled a massive expansion throughout the embassy to over 2,000 people (including consulates and local hires). And as the military mission grew, the intelligence presence grew, and indeed the number of diplomats grew—there were desks in the hallways of the embassy because office space was simply full. Along with Baghdad and Kabul, the American Embassy in Islamabad was one of the biggest in the world.

USAID was staffed with a number of dedicated professionals and hired some of the most talented local Pakistani staff for the mission, but it suffered from a problem similar to what I had seen in Iraq: aid workers were assigned for short terms (a year or less), few of them had an understanding of local culture, and all of them were under enormous pressure—given the size of the assistance budget—to ensure proper oversight as well as a proper “burn rate.” Success was measured by how quickly the money was spent, and how completely it was reported to Congress. Thus many assistance workers found themselves, usually to their horror, more closely tied to Washington than to the country in which they served. The Foreign Service officer overseeing USAID provided overall guidance; USAID chafed at the guidance, often answering questions along the lines of “Look, this is how we did it in Mexico.”

As for the impact on non-state actors: I was aware of programs seeking to counter violent extremism, aimed especially at youth in areas such as southern Punjab and the areas surrounding major cities, but the process was new and any assessment of impact came after my time. Similarly, there were programs designed to bring opportunities to Pakistanis in the tribal areas, but because of the danger posed to assistance workers by an affiliation with the U.S. embassy, we were fairly quiet about them, so the measurement of the impact there, too, was rather episodic.

The Vaunted Local Buy-In

Once again, the problem was focus. On the one hand, Kerry-Lugar-Berman money was supposed to be committed to projects the Pakistanis wanted. Unfortunately, many members of the Pakistani government were, to be blunt, utterly incompetent and were in their ministries because of patronage rather than talent or even commitment. Ministers often told us they wanted to see monuments to U.S.-Pakistani friendship “like the Chinese provided”—a steel mill, a mega-university—or an infrastructure project like the Tarbela Dam built with U.S. help in the 1970s. More thoughtful Pakistani leaders sought help with energy, education, and job creation, all enormous problems for a country of nearly 200 million, most of whom are young but with unclear prospects. American public officials, feeling flush with assistance money in the first days of Kerry-Lugar-Berman, initially engaged in what I referred to as “drive-by grant-giving,” visiting a worthy NGO helping women’s empowerment or a local project to build charter schools and promising funds.

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There was yet another problem: that of outside partners. Our policy was to try to reduce the role of U.S. beltway bandits, and to channel money through local institutions. Constitutional changes in Pakistan had recently given authority over areas such as education and health to provincial governments, and so the logic was that by working with provincial authorities in say, the Education Ministry of Baluchistan, we were not only bringing a service to the people of the province but building the capacity of the bureaucrats in Quetta. Sadly, it was often the case that provinces with a tradition of competent governance, such as Punjab, did a better job with the flood of Kerry-Lugar-Berman money than did those in less competent provinces like Sindh. I recall local worthies in Karachi asking me, “You gave money to those guys? I would never do such a thing,” as if it were self-evident that the representatives of the people in the south were the last people anyone could expect to serve the needs of those people. On the other hand, the non-profits and other partners were uneven as well—and the security situation made it nearly impossible for the USAID officials to engage personally with many of them in a systematic way.

And of course, the real world had a habit of interfering as well: the disastrous floods of fall 2010 destroyed millions of dollars of crops and thousands of homes in addition to claiming hundreds of victims. It is understandable that the U.S. government reprogrammed, at great effort, as much as \$500 million earmarked for other projects to go to flood relief (and in fact, despite predictions of famine in 2011, Pakistan actually exported grain, in part thanks to high-yield U.S. seeds that were rushed to southern Punjab and northern Sindh). But reprogramming has its costs. The “pipeline” of a project, as USAID calls it, is long and bureaucratic, and many worthy longer-term projects were terminated or delayed, often at great cost, to achieve the immediate goal of flood relief. The USAID chief in Islamabad—a dedicated and extraordinarily hard-working individual—told me he found this the most frustrating part of his job: his inability to see projects to fruition because of political interference (often casting sharp looks at me and the State Department assistance coordinator).

Focus and Prioritization

In 2011, in a series of meetings with the U.S. Deputy Secretary of State for Resources and the head of USAID, we agreed on Kerry-Lugar-Berman priorities. These were priorities chosen in part by those Pakistani experts

whom we trusted; by our own USAID staff; but also by the interests of many in Washington, from Congressional staffers to NGO leaders, who made their voices heard at the highest levels. We chose education, energy efficiency, job creation, special projects in the tribal areas, and public health—and these began to look very much like the creation of LOOs.

Even with this attempt at focus, we still had the problem I recognized from Iraq. It is one thing to define a task. It is quite another to apply it to the specific context of a country in which security considerations prevent most USAID workers from even laying eyes on their projects. Thus, in education, we often did what we knew how to do—build schools—even while there were indications that our buildings would never be used, that the teachers for such schools would be untrained or altogether did not exist, or that curriculum reform would not likely take place. USAID officials increasingly have become budget overseers rather than experts on the ground, often to their own dismay.

Overall, we were much better at measuring our commitment to a prosperous, democratic Pakistan at peace with its neighbors by counting how much we spent and how fast rather than creating the proper relationship with those on the ground with whom we might have partnered. Here I should engage in a little self-criticism. I was aware of this, and made my concerns known to USAID, the State Department, and the White House. But in Pakistan in 2011 I spent most of my energy on counter-terrorism issues. So there was little reform, at least from my end. Despite some real flashes of brilliance by embassy officials—such as efforts to reach out to new audiences and ensure that the Pakistani public understood our assistance contributions, and some concrete successes like new turbines in power stations and tube wells in the fields—most assistance to Pakistan at that time not only fell short of expectations, but was eclipsed in the public eye by drone strikes or Osama bin Laden’s demise. I wish I had figured out ways to get my USAID workers out of the embassy and into the field. I wish I had been able, more systematically, to assess.

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Policy Implications

Under such circumstances, what then are lessons learned?

When security is shaky, assistance is difficult. It may be that in situations like the AIP countries, we only have the capacity to engage in humanitarian aid and immediate reconstruction. If that is so, then the whole question of engagement in dangerous places is reopened: in a military setting, with military tasks, and thus a military system of organization, can civilian assistance succeed? Money spent is the way we measure commitment in such a setting, and that doesn't bring the results we need.

Who should carry out assistance? It seemed to me that local knowledge was key, and in the instances I've cited, very thin. That may call for a different kind of USAID worker, someone who is less skilled in grant proposals and budget oversight and more skilled in those areas necessary to local improvement. Initial experiments at PRTs may not have worked in all cases, but there's an argument to be made for being out of the capital when engaged in aid projects.

What about the military's role in assistance, for example with CERP? Should it only be disbursed with civilian authorization? This is where efforts at whole-of-government assistance have made the most progress in recent years. Most officers I met didn't like acting as aid officials; there are some civilians who are quite good at it. Mixing the two in the future—by assigning competent civilians to combat units—might be effective.

It will be instructive to see what happens in Pakistan if and when the Chinese "One Belt One Road" investment begins. China has promised \$48 billion to Pakistan for monumental infrastructure projects. In the past, China has not been as concerned about transparency and accountability in foreign aid as America. But if the highways and pipelines—the monumental projects—go forward without oversight, in insecure areas, bolstering the fortunes of those elites whose track record with the Pakistani economy is less than stellar, one has to wonder about the results.

More broadly, we should take a good look at what we might call the "art and science" of assistance. The artists, often romantics who seek a bottom-up

solution, sometimes identifying with the recipients of aid more than with those who employ them, need to be realistic about why they are there. But the scientists, those who look for underlying truths and tendencies and seek to impose what I called a constitutional reform on foreign lands, must take a good look at the contexts in which they work. There are just too many details, too many players, and too many unforeseen specific problems for such broad visions to succeed without careful thought.

Finally, rather than thinking only of the limitations of U.S. assistance—and yes, there are limitations on U.S. assistance, not only in the amount we may spend but in the impact we may have—American officials should look increasingly for partnerships with others, the non-state actors who play important roles in development and the politics of peaceful growth. International partners, investment capital, NGOs, entrepreneurs, universities and charities—all of these—are the new purveyors of assistance. The problems with focus that I mentioned above will probably be increased by their presence. But the possibilities of understanding details, building relations, and ultimately finding durable solutions to problems are even greater. Why do I say “problems with focus”? Because embassies have an obligation to serve capitals; and political leaders in capitals, executive and legislative alike, have competing pressures and constituencies they must serve. Spending the people’s money on foreign assistance, at least in a democracy, requires accountability and oversight. Embassies seek to provide that. And so the focus embassies seek to impose on assistance can run counter to the insights that a more diverse and diffuse coalition of partnerships will provide. What would it take for the U.S. government to learn to benefit from the expertise that partners “on the ground” provide while serving the needs of domestic constituencies in the United States? It’s a question worth asking. It has much to do with the way USAID chooses to see its work as an extension of the policy guidance of the State Department; it has much to do with the relative importance the State Department’s officers give assistance in the overall achievement of foreign policy goals; and perhaps most of all, it has much to do with Congressional oversight and demands on how money is spent, how processes are monitored, and how those legislators and their staffs responsible for spending public money for political goals can learn how complex situations in foreign lands make that task difficult and frustrating—and accept that a broader set of partnerships may make things harder to explain back home but in the end may lead to more successful interventions around the world.

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