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Post-Conflict Stabilization and Reconstruction What Have We Learned From Iraq and Afghanistan

By Christina Caan
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Key lessons are emerging from the complex operations of the post-conflict stabilization and reconstruction missions in both Iraq and Afghanistan.

The U.S. Institute of Peace has undertaken the most systematic efforts to date to gather "lessons learned" from civilian Americans returning from these operations. On the occasion of the publication of its two special reports—[The Coalition Provisional Authority's Experience with Public Security in Iraq](#) and [The Coalition Provisional Authority's Experience with Economic Reconstruction in Iraq](#)—the Institute convened a distinguished panel of experts to discuss critical lessons learned during their post-conflict work in Iraq and Afghanistan.

The panelists at the April 14 event on "[Security, Governance and Reconstruction: What Have We Learned in Iraq and Afghanistan?](#)" were: Rick Barton, Senior Advisor at the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) and Co-Director of the CSIS Post-Conflict Reconstruction Project; Rajiv Chandrasekaran, journalist in residence at the International Reporting Project at the Johns Hopkins School for Advanced International Studies (SAIS) and former Washington Post Baghdad bureau chief; Martin Hoffmann, Executive Director of the Afghanistan Reachback Office at the Department of Defense; and [Robert Perito](#), Coordinator of the Iraq and Afghanistan Experience Projects at the Institute of Peace. [Daniel Serwer](#), the Institute's Vice President and Director of Peace and Stability Operations, moderated the event. The following summary is based on their presentations and does not represent the views of the Institute, which does not take positions on policy issues.

Security must be a priority...

Lesson Identified: In the immediate aftermath of combat, local security forces are unwilling, unable, or unavailable to deal with civilian violence and lawlessness.

Following the U.S. capture of Baghdad, a significant, yet predictable, breakdown in law and order occurred. Looting, street crime, and general lawlessness were rampant because the U.S. military initially lacked orders to provide law enforcement and Iraqi security forces were unwilling to ensure public safety. According to the Institute's Robert Perito, an expert on post-conflict security, "...this initial experience undermined local support for the coalition and allowed a climate of impunity to take hold." Given these problematic consequences, Perito, who was echoed by other panelists, stressed the importance of ensuring law and order immediately following the end of major combat operations. Because local security forces cannot be relied on to provide effective law enforcement, he claimed that international police advisors and police trainers must be a part of the intervention force.

Lesson Identified: Local police require extensive retraining and equipping, but are ultimately only as good as the institutions that stand behind them.

As in Bosnia, Haiti and Kosovo, international police advisors were needed in Iraq to retrain, equip, and supervise local security forces. Yet, instead of international police advisors, the task of standing up the Iraqi Police Force initially fell to five members of the U.S. Department of Justice. "This critical mission thus quickly became a mission impossible," according to Perito. Training, equipping, and supervising local

police must be a priority in post-conflict stabilization and reconstruction operations. Rick Barton of CSIS, who recently returned from Afghanistan, suggested that public security has not been properly prioritized, as the Afghan National Police continue to require a great deal more training and an increase in pay to ensure success and sustainability. Several panelists stressed that police are a critical component of ensuring public safety, but they alone cannot ensure law and order, which is ultimately contingent upon establishing a functioning judicial system, including courts and prisons.

Lesson Identified: Strategies to achieve security must be integrated with reconstruction strategies, as the two are inextricably linked.

The interdependence between security and reconstruction must not be overlooked in post-conflict reconstruction and stabilization operations. Security strategies must therefore be inextricably linked with reconstruction strategies. Rajiv Chandrasekaran of SAIS pointed out that, "We can be ambitious [in our reconstruction goals] if we have security, but if you have a smaller footprint, you need less ambition." The Pentagon's Martin Hoffmann praised the Provincial Reconstruction Team model being employed in Afghanistan as an effective format for linking security and reconstruction.

Governance demands a long-term commitment..

Lesson Identified: U.S. civilian and military agencies need to coordinate efforts and develop financial systems that allow for the rapid dispersal of aid to local actors, especially local government officials, who are vital to success.

While the importance of governance at the national level is apparent in a post-conflict environment, Barton stressed the need to empower local actors in both Afghanistan and Iraq by providing them with financial resources. "Who would want to be mayor if they can't fix the potholes?" he asked. Success, Barton suggested, will depend largely on the ability to "recognize native resourcefulness and give it a catalytic boost." In Iraq, efforts to establish local governance were undertaken by three disparate actors: the Coalition Provisional Authority, the coalition forces, and the U.S. Agency for International Development, through the Research Triangle Institute. According to Perito, the work of these three groups often overlapped and was uncoordinated, which hindered progress on this important front. Village councils established by inexperienced coalition battalion commanders had to be dismantled after finding they contained disreputable members. The experience in Iraq demonstrated that planning and pre-positioning resources, as well as ensuring that U.S. civilian agencies and the U.S. military develop expertise in establishing local governance and operate in a coordinated fashion, is essential for success.

Lesson Identified: Building democracy requires an understanding of local history and culture.

Democratic governance cannot be built overnight. This is because building democratic governance in post-conflict settings requires more than just creating institutions; it requires training and mentoring the local population. Yet, such training and mentoring cannot be successful, especially in countries with a history of oppressive governance, without an understanding of the specific local history and culture. In all, as Chandrasekaran pointed out, "We need to think about local solutions and not just imposing our system." Given the need to train and mentor the local population and the ineffectiveness of merely imposing a Western system, efforts to enable democratic governance need to be understood as long-term projects that require a long-term commitment.

Economic reconstruction needs sound planning...

Lesson Identified: High hopes and lofty promises are no substitute for sound planning and prudent expectations.

Early in the post-conflict stabilization and reconstruction of Iraq, the Coalition Provisional Authority promised immediate and dramatic improvements to the Iraqi economy. When the CPA failed to deliver on this promise, inflated expectations went unmet and frustration grew. While this is but one example, U.S. experiences in Iraq have consistently demonstrated that, as Perito mentioned, "Optimism is not a strategy." High hopes and lofty promises not only artificially increase expectations, which can lead to

disappointment and resentment, but they can also detract attention from smaller successes. Sound planning ensures expectations will be properly managed, as it allows realistic goals to be set and achieved in a timely fashion. Properly managing the expectations of the local population is critical to maintaining local support and involvement. Also, Barton suggested, "these [post-conflict stabilization and reconstruction missions] are huge, impossible jobs. We need to make them bite size, so they are addressable." Again, sound planning can be an effective mechanism for ensuring that these missions are 'bite size' and that achievable goals are set.

Lesson Identified: The authority to enact reconstruction policies must be matched by the capacity to implement them.

Chandrasekaran, as well as other panelists, spoke to the need to match the authority to enact reconstruction policies with the resources to implement them. He commented that in Iraq it took too long to mobilize the resources required to demonstrate the U.S. commitment to the reconstruction effort. This led to disenchantment and frustration among Iraqis, which has hindered our progress on the ground. Likewise, part and parcel of matching the authority to enact reconstruction policies with the capacity to implement them is the need to implement projects quickly. Hoffman stressed that his experiences in Afghanistan demonstrated that "the Golden Hour is a very real phenomenon and the speed of implementation counts." Thus, not only must planners match authority and capacity in post-conflict settings, they must be able to implement policies quickly to ensure rapid impact.

Lesson Identified: Promoting private enterprise requires more than just removing barriers.

Both Hoffmann and Perito stressed the need for promoting private enterprise in post-conflict environments. Hoffmann claimed that the main lesson from Afghanistan was "...that the speed with which we introduce private enterprise and economic development is fundamental to our success." A substantial part of ensuring economic development in Afghanistan will be providing alternative livelihoods for Afghans involved in the narcotics industry, according to Hoffman. He stated that even though the Afghan people are motivated and dedicated "...the narcotic economy could take our whole venture down." Perito noted that providing credit, training and opportunity, not just removing barriers, is important to rebuilding enterprise in war-torn areas.

Moving from lessons identified to lessons implemented..

There are many lessons to be learned from the post-conflict reconstruction and stabilization experiences in Iraq and Afghanistan. Perhaps the most important lesson, however, is that U.S. success in these missions depends ultimately on ensuring a dedicated and united effort. The focus must be on achieving the mission goals. To enhance its ability to achieve its goals, the United States "...must move from lessons identified to lessons implemented," said Hoffmann. This is the new challenge. Finding the means and motivation to implement these lessons is critical, because, as Barton concluded, "a more peaceful world depends on it."

Of Related Interest

[Security, Governance and Reconstruction: What Have We Learned in Iraq and Afghanistan?](#)

Event, April 2005 (Video & Audio)

[The Coalition Provisional Authority's Experience with Public Security in Iraq: Lessons Identified](#)

[The Coalition Provisional Authority's Experience with Economic Reconstruction in Iraq: Lessons Identified](#)

[Where Is the Lone Ranger When We Need Him? America's Search for a Postconflict Stability Force](#)

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This USIPeaceBriefing was written by Christina Caan, Research Assistant in the [Peace and Stability Operations](#) program at the Institute of Peace. The views expressed here are not necessarily those of the Institute, which does not advocate specific policies.

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