

Blind Ambition: Lessons Learned While Rebuilding Baghdad

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“We’re worse than the blind leading the blind because at least the blind know they are blind.”¹
-David Atteberry, USAID Representative, Rasheed ePRT, September 3, 2007

Provincial Reconstruction Teams (“PRTs”) and their much smaller and operationally leaner dependencies, the Embedded Provincial Reconstruction Teams (“ePRTs”) have made lasting and meaningful contributions to our national post-conflict reconstruction and stabilization efforts in Iraq since their inception in November, 2005.² This article represents the observations and experiences of one person on a single ePRT operating in the same expanse of Southern Baghdad Province over a period of eighteen months from the tail end of the “Baghdad Surge” in late 2008 through the post-March, 2010 Council of Representatives election and transfer of power. Towards that end, this article is mostly anecdotal in nature and does not necessarily reflect what surely were different experiences and operational realities on other PRTs and ePRTs in other parts of Iraq.

PRT Operations in Iraq – A Primer

PRTs were a concept introduced to Iraq during the tenure of Ambassador Zalmay Khalilzad which he borrowed from his experiences in Afghanistan.³ The PRTs’ mission was to “[A]ssist Iraq’s provincial governments with developing a transparent and sustained capability to govern, promote increased security and rule of law, promote political and economic development, and

¹ United States Special Inspector General for Iraq Reconstruction. *Hard Lessons. The Iraq Reconstruction Experience*. Washington: GPO (2009), 303.

² *Ibid.* p. 241.

³ *Hard Lessons.* p. 240.

provide the provincial administration necessary to meet the needs of the population.”⁴ PRTs focused on five thematic areas, including governance, economics, infrastructure, rule of law, and public diplomacy.⁵ Our ePRT took on the additional areas of agricultural development, public health, and women’s social equality issues.

Embedded PRTs or “ePRTs” were typically smaller, leaner versions of the PRT and embedded with U.S. Brigade Combat Teams in Anbar, Baghdad and Babil Provinces.⁶ At the program’s zenith, there were a total of thirty-one American-led PRTs across Iraq, with thirteen being ePRTs.⁷ The stated roles of the ePRTs were to support counterinsurgency operations by bolstering moderates whom rejected violence as a means of achieving their goals; promoting reconciliation and facilitating dialogue across Iraqi society; fostering economic development, largely through micro-finance initiatives and building governmental capacity, especially as it related to the delivery of essential services.⁸ At its height, our ePRT had an interagency advisory staff of fourteen, comprised of mostly State Department employees, but also included personnel from the U.S. Agency for International Development, U.S. Department of Agriculture and the U.S. Public Health Service – Centers for Disease Control & Prevention.

Absence of Strategic Focus

During the latter part of 2008 and the bulk of 2009, the team’s focus was building upon the post-Baghdad Surge’s security gains in the hope of increasing the capacity of local governments to deliver essential services, especially clean drinking water, irrigation water, electricity, sanitary methods of sewage disposal, access to healthcare, access to primary and secondary education, and to a somewhat lesser extent, trash removal. This was done largely in the absence of operational-level guidance which would have served to link what we were doing on the ground with our broader national security and foreign policy objectives.

In the absence of being able to dovetail our operations into a larger, more comprehensive operational-level plan, the resulting effect was a high incidence of “feel good” projects – those which produced some tangible example of American good works (typically complete with an information operations event, such as a grand opening ceremony with a conspicuous number of attending dignitaries and robust media coverage). These projects (usually taking the form of brick and mortar construction) often lacked any sort of coordination with the Government of Iraq to insure they fit within their Capital Improvement Planning.

⁴ Unclassified Baghdad 4045, “Action Plan to Build Capacity and Sustainability within Iraq’s Provincial Governments,” From Embassy Baghdad to SECSTATE, 010330Z October 2005.

⁵ U.S. Embassy – Baghdad, “PRT (Provincial Reconstruction Teams) Fact Sheet,” March 20, 2008.

⁶ Office of the White House Press Secretary, “Fact Sheet: Expanded Provincial Reconstruction Teams Speed the Transition to Self-Reliance,” July 13, 2007. (<http://merln.ndu.edu/archivepdf/iraq/WH/20070713.pdf>)

⁷ PRT Fact Sheet, *Ibid.*

⁸ White House Fact Sheet, *Ibid.*

Additionally, we had little way of knowing if such projects furthered progress towards meeting the strategic end-state. There was little to no linkage between the strategic and tactical levels of the civilian-led aspects of our national reconstruction and stabilization efforts. We were left hoping that we were doing the right thing and advancing in the right direction. It was tantamount to the collection of “scouting merit badges” with each project representing another badge. The “merit badges” could be touted as tangible proof of reconstruction progress, but there was little connection (other than perhaps an accidental one) between the projects and other reconstruction efforts executed at the local level and the achievement of our strategic end state.

Initially, we unwittingly did more to destabilize this fragile region than we did to stabilize it. The absence of competent Government of Iraq (GOI) officials to work through at the local level resulted in our local project work (agriculture, economic development and some of the USAID’s general development projects) being implemented by either local sheikhs or NGOs. The NGO’s themselves were created in response to DoS funding regulations and designed to benefit the same group of sheikhs. This included projects funded by both the State Department’s Quick Response Funds (“QRF”) program and the Military’s Commander’s Emergency Response Program (“CERP”).

Neither the civilian nor military reconstruction efforts fully understood the effects of project funding on the balance of tribal power in this mostly rural area, or that their attendant funding increased the power, prestige, influence or “wasta” of a particular sheikh or tribe in one area while simultaneously decreasing the influence of another sheikh or tribe. Creating the conditions for stability in one area often destabilized another area.

This truism played-out across the entire Mahmudiyah Qada in the military’s desire to assist local stability and tribal reconciliation efforts in Al Rashid Nahiya, which lies upon a notorious Sunni-Shia fault line in the northern part of the qada in the vicinity of the intersection of MSRs Jackson and Tampa. The military purchased over \$300,000-worth of tractors to benefit local agricultural associations through the nahiya council. The game plan entailed the council delivering these tractors prior to the January, 2009, Provincial Elections with a goal of improving the popular perception of local government within the area.

Delivery was delayed until months after the Provincial Council election due to factors beyond the military’s control, but the ability to achieve non-kinetic effects on election security had certainly lapsed. The tractors, in the final analysis, benefited only a select number of sheikhs in a relatively small area of our operational environment whom had allied themselves with a well-known local sheikh who ran the local governing council in an authoritarian manner which would have made Stalin proud. The anticipated second and third order effects of disenfranchising numerous tribes/sheikhs within the qada were known to the brigade’s senior leadership at the time of the decision but were disregarded.

Word of mouth on the Iraqi street moves at an amazingly quick pace. Within days of the “big tractor give-away,” sheikhs from other parts of the qada were contacting our civil-military operations center, asking when they would be supplied with tractors or complaining that the Americans somehow “owed” them similar treatment because of the support they delivered in the form of security gains during the Baghdad Surge. Every other local nahia council soon

demanded its own tractors. The qada-wide agricultural cooperative association, with member organizations across the qada, outright refused to work with “the Americans” until they were provided with equivalent support. The decision proved disastrous and its negative repercussions were felt for a full year afterward.

With good intentions, we championed projects designed to improve local agriculture which looked good on paper, however, the net effects served to only increase the wealth and prestige of a few select sheikhs to the detriment of other sheiks in different areas of the qada. Those areas not receiving direct U.S. assistance invariably felt slighted and often became publicly critical of, if not overtly hostile towards, what they perceived to be American intervention in Iraqi affairs.

Lack of Unity of Effort between Military and Civilian Reconstruction Efforts

The military brought numerous assets to the table – a significant number of personnel for the task; a very significant budget; and the logistical and mobility assets which allowed it to be nearly everywhere in our area of operations at once. The downside to this huge, well-intentioned Leviathan was organizational inertia on a grand scale which had no outlet (save reconstruction operations) in the post-June 30th Security Framework Agreement Iraq. Precluded from conducting combat operations, the military focused on “non-kinetic effects” – its shorthand for reconstruction operations.

While the State Department was the lead federal agency for reconstruction and stabilization operations,⁹ the brigade combat teams we were embedded with had their own, separate agendas. The first brigade we worked with viewed the ePRT simply as a “brigade enabler” and expected the civilian efforts of the ePRT to be subordinate to the overarching brigade concept of the operation. This caused friction on numerous levels. First, the brigade largely ran its own set of engagements with numerous civilian Iraqi governmental officials, often without any coordination with the ePRT whose role it was to engage with, train, and mentor the same set of officials. This often led to the embarrassing situation of unwittingly meeting with the same official the day after the military met with them, sometimes regarding the exact issue.

Programmatically, the ePRT and the military’s differences stemmed primarily from two sources – first, a difference of opinion regarding where we sat on the operational continuum; and secondly, different timelines. The net effect was an almost complete lack of unity of effort and the military and State Department working from two completely different playbooks.

The Operational Continuum

The military justified many of its reconstruction/“non-lethal” decisions by framing them in the context of security measures necessary to further its counterinsurgency objectives. Many of us on the ePRT looked at the same local political reconciliation/security situation and felt it had matured beyond “straight-up” counterinsurgency operations (“COIN”) and was ripe for post-conflict governmental capacity building efforts. Capacity building involves the concept of “sustainability” – for which the military seemed to have little understanding.

⁹ National Security Presidential Directive 44. December 7, 2005.

The military tended to move into an area and immediately start a myriad of reconstruction projects, most of which did serve to improve Iraqi quality of life in this otherwise decimated area. The problem was that funding projects for the Iraqi Government replaced capacity rather than developing it. During COIN operations, using “money as a weapons system”¹⁰ in order to produce (or perhaps purchase) desirable non-kinetic effects makes perfect sense. When transitioning to more traditional post-conflict stability and reconstruction operations, however, this long-standing practice actually served to retard Iraqi governmental capacity rather than build it. The United States was universally viewed by local Iraqi governmental entities as the funding source of first resort. Due to long standing spending habits, our ability to influence eventually became directly proportional to the amount of money we brought to the table.

Some local nahiya councils (the Iraqi equivalent to city or township councils in rural areas) we worked with completely stopped preparing council budgets for review and funding by the Government of Iraq preferring U.S. military funding for their developmental needs. American money was simply too plentiful and too easily obtained. Part and parcel of our attempt at teaching local councils to become more self-sufficient (an inherently difficult task, in that local councils had no stand-alone budget or income source) was teaching them how to prioritize their developmental needs across the various GOI funding streams and establish the necessary intergovernmental relationships in order to obtain funding commitments. Our prodding fell largely on deaf ears, as the Iraqis simply approached American commanders who were all too willing to open the CERP checkbook in the name of “building relationships” with local power brokers and the achievement of “non-kinetic effects.”

Reconstruction Timelines

Another inherent disconnect between the military’s operations and those of the ePRT’s were different timelines. The ePRT, through its USAID representative, tended to look at longer-term, often multi-year projects. The Military, on the other hand, had a time horizon of a year or less, usually benchmarked to the length of the unit’s tour in Iraq. Military projects tended to focus on the “quick win” with visible indices of “progress,” such as schools, health clinics and road improvements. The military focused its efforts on “bright and shiny objects” and things that lent themselves to media coverage and “IO effects.”

This practice made good sense during COIN operations, when influencing the populace is of primary importance, but did little to assist with institutional capacity building. These short-game wins tended to replace capacity rather than build it. The military tended to do projects “for” the Iraqi government rather than forcing them to step-up to do things themselves. The Iraqis were more than content to sit back and let the United States do the work they should have done themselves. This practice was the antithesis of capacity building.

Lessons Learned

¹⁰ “Money as a Weapons System (MAAWS).” Multi-National Corps-Iraq CJ8 SOP, Appendix H, dated: 15 June 2008.

There are numerous things we need to do better in future stability operations. While this list is not exhaustive, it is representative of the problems faced during our ePRT's operation over eighteen months and three different brigade combat teams.

- **Military leaders need more training in interagency reconstruction and capacity building operations.** Most of the military leaders at the brigade combat team level lacked a fundamental understanding of what “the interagency” brought to the warfight, how to harness its vast capabilities and even more basic concepts such as “who was in charge” (i.e., lead federal agency). Lacking this understanding, what should have been a symbiotic relationship was fraught with friction. Most military leaders viewed the ePRT as merely a “brigade enabler” rather than at least a partner in its operations or, more realistically, the lead agency within the unit's area of operations for post-conflict reconstruction and capacity building. This turf battle was a constant driver of inefficiency. The military needs to make the mandate of DoD Instruction 3000.05, that it be as proficient in stability operations as in combat operations, a reality.¹¹
- **“Lead Federal Agencies” need to actually “lead.”** There is little question that the Department of State is inadequately funded and resourced to accomplish its reconstruction and stabilization responsibilities. This being said, however, we received precious little by way of operational guidance from PRT Baghdad, the Embassy's Office of Provincial Affairs or the two Ambassadors whom I served under. To the extent there was “front office” involvement in PRT/ePRT issues, it was primarily focused upon the PRT drawdown plan. While much time and energy was expended in determining the size and composition of the sub-national civilian footprint, what seemed to be absent from the calculus was the fact that civilian assets were drawing-down at a quicker and more significant pace than the military component. This seemed rather counterintuitive, in that most reconstruction models call for a corresponding increase in civilian capacity (i.e., a “civilian surge” of sorts) as the military presence draws-down. This left gaping holes in our overall ability to continue reconstruction operations as we approached the post-COR election transition of power.
- **Reduce the rate of military AO turnover (aka “my school needs to be rebuilt... again”).** The rate of battlespace turnover between military units (aka, “transfer of authority” or “TOA”) was probably too frequent to build good civil-military relationships with our Iraqi interlocutors. Every nine months or so, the Iraqi governmental officials, tribal, and business leaders with whom we would regularly engage would have to learn a whole new panoply of Americans. This also gave the Iraqi governmental and tribal leaders, who were astute opportunists, the ability to pitch their wish-list to successive commanders on at least a yearly basis. This led to numerous, otherwise unnecessary, projects being started or funded in the name of “building relationships.”
- **The zenith of “Money as a Weapons System (“MAAWS”).”** Money is probably the preeminent tool in a counterinsurgency. It has the ability to independently influence, provide access to decision makers and other “levers of influence” and turn enemies into allies (as exemplified by the Sawa or “Sons of Iraq” movement). Efforts to build governmental capacity, on the other hand, often benefit from not leading with money.

¹¹ United States Department of Defense Instruction 3000.05, Subject: Stability Operations. September 16, 2009.

The Government of Iraq became conditioned to look to the U.S. military particularly and the U.S. Government, more generally, as the bill payer of first resort. We were often unable to get the Government of Iraq to move forward on their own until we were able to convince them that we lacked or were otherwise unable to provide money to apply against whatever the problem of the day happened to be. Once the Government of Iraq was forced into that position, they would actually start coordinating and breaking bureaucratic stovepipes.

- Our efforts were often derailed by the military losing millions of dollars of CERP funding in the name of “If we don’t spend it, we will lose the money to the Afghanistan effort.” This resulted in numerous unnecessary projects being funded, as well as numerous CERP microgrants being made in less than well thought out ways. This problem was exacerbated by the military’s flawed metrics which evaluated relative “success” by the amount of CERP money obligated, projects funded and microgrants made, without regard to effects. Microgrants, for example, were given primarily to business owners, which created the perception within the community that our only interest was “making the rich richer.”
- Taken with our affinity for assisting tribal sheikhs under the guise of “security,” this perception seemed well-founded. The net effect was that our ability to influence, or even get a seat at the table, was directly proportional to the amount of money we brought. When the money dried-up, so did our influence.

Conclusion

The use of ePRTs and PRTs as civilian adjuncts to the military’s counterinsurgency operations has proven their worth during our military and diplomatic involvement thus far in Iraq. Unfortunately, we seemed to traipse blindly down what turned-out to be a very uncertain path towards our national strategic end-state. While part of this was certainly due to the relative novelty of such operations (save the CORDS program utilized with success during our involvement in South Vietnam),¹² we could have been more effective had the civilian effort been less *ad hoc*. Secondly, had the military possessed a more complete understanding of the civilian/interagency capabilities, what they “bring to the warfight” and how to better harness their capabilities, the overall United States Government effort would have been more effective.

In future conflicts, the civilian/interagency contribution will undoubtedly be critical to achieving the strategic end state. It should be better utilized. In order to do this, it will need to be more effectively led and better understood by its military counterparts. To “win the peace” we must be just as effective in stabilization and transfer to civil authority phases as we are in decisive combat operations. Until we make such successes a priority in our doctrine, training, resourcing—to include requiring proven competency in the skill sets required for such operations—we will simply remain the “blind leading the blind” down an uncertain path.

¹² The CORDS (Civil Operations and Revolutionary Development Support) pacification program in rural Vietnam is an interesting precursor to Provincial Reconstruction Teams used in Afghanistan and Iraq.

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