

Rebuilding Iraq

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During the summer of 2003 the US Department of Defense sent a team of post-conflict reconstruction specialists to Iraq to assess the DoD's efforts. What follows is the Executive Summary of their report, lightly edited for clarity. Many of the report's recommendations are highly relevant six months later, though the window for implementing them is closing rapidly. The full report is available online at <http://www.csis.org/isp/pcr/IraqTrip.pdf>.

Rebuilding Iraq is an enormous task. Iraq is a large country with historic divisions, exacerbated by a brutal and corrupt regime. The country's 24 million people and its infrastructure and service delivery mechanisms have suffered decades of severe degradation and under-investment. Elements of the old regime engage in a campaign of sabotage and ongoing resistance, greatly magnifying the “natural” challenges of rebuilding Iraq. Given the daunting array of needs and challenges, and the national security imperative for the United States to succeed in this endeavor, the United States needs to be prepared to stay the course in Iraq for several years. . .

All players are watching closely to see how resolutely the coalition will handle the [security] challenge. The Iraqi population has exceedingly high expectations, and the window for cooperation may close rapidly if they do not see progress on delivering security, basic services, opportunities for broad political involvement, and economic opportunity. The “hearts and minds” of key segments of the Sunni and Shi'a communities are in play and can be won, but only if the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) and new Iraqi authorities deliver in short order. To do so, the CPA will have to dramatically and expeditiously augment its operational capacity throughout the country, so that civilian-led rebuilding can proceed while there are still significant numbers of coalition forces in Iraq to provide maximum leverage over those who seek to thwart the process.

To succeed, the United States and its allies will need to pursue a strategy. . . that: recognizes the unique challenges in different parts of the country; consolidates gains in those areas where things are going well; and wins hearts and minds even as it decisively confronts spoilers.

Seven major areas need immediate attention.

1. The coalition must establish public safety in all parts of the country. In addition to ongoing efforts, this will involve: reviewing force composition and structure, as well as composite force levels (U.S., coalition, and Iraqi) so as to be able to address the need for increased street-level presence in key conflictive areas; quickly hiring private security to help stand up and supervise a rapid expansion of the Iraqi Facility Protection Service, thereby freeing thousands of U.S. troops from this duty; ratcheting up efforts to recruit sufficient levels of international civilian police through all available channels; and, launching a major initiative to reintegrate “self demobilized” Iraqi soldiers and local militias.

2. Iraqi ownership of the rebuilding process must be expanded at national, provincial, and local levels. At the national level ensuring success of the newly formed Iraqi Governing Council is crucial. This will require avoiding overloading it with too many controversial issues too soon. The natural desire to draw anger away from the coalition by putting an Iraqi face on the most difficult decisions must be balanced with a realistic assessment of what the council can successfully manage. At the provincial and local levels, coalition forces and the CPA have made great progress in establishing political councils throughout the country, but they need direction and the ability to respond to local needs and demands. To achieve this, local and provincial political councils need to have access to resources and be linked to the national Iraqi Governing Council and the constitutional process.

3. Idle hands must be put to work and basic economic and social services provided immediately to avoid exacerbating political and security problems. A model economy will not be created overnight out of Iraq's failed statist economic structures. Short-term public works projects are needed on a large scale to soak up sizable amounts of the available labor pool. Simultaneously, the CPA must get a large number of formerly state-owned enterprises up and running. Even if many of them are not competitive and may need to be privatized and downsized eventually, now is the time to get as many people back to work as possible. A massive micro-credit program in all provinces would help to spur wide-ranging economic activity, and help to empower key agents of change such as women. The CPA must also do whatever is necessary to immediately refurbish basic services, especially electricity, water, and sanitation.

4. Decentralization is essential. The job facing occupation and Iraqi authorities is too big to be handled exclusively by the central occupying authority and national Iraqi Governing Council. Implementation is lagging far behind needs and expectations in key areas, at least to some extent because of severely constrained CPA human resources at the provincial and local levels. This situation must be addressed immediately by decentralizing key functions of the CPA to the provincial level, thereby enhancing operational speed and effectiveness and allowing maximum empowerment of Iraqis. The CPA must rapidly recruit and field a much greater number of civilian experts to guide key governance, economic, social, justice, and also some security components of the occupation.

5. The coalition must facilitate a profound change in the Iraqi national frame of mind - from centralized authority to significant freedoms, from suspicion to trust, from skepticism to hope. This will require an intense and effective communications and marketing campaign, not the status quo. The CPA needs to win the confidence and support of the Iraqi people. Communication - between the CPA and the Iraqi people, and within the CPA itself - is insufficient so far. Drastic changes must be made to immediately improve the daily flow of practical information to the Iraqi people, principally through enhanced radio and TV programming. Iraqis need to hear about difficulties and successes from authoritative sources. Secondly, the CPA needs to gather information from Iraqis much more effectively - through a more robust civilian ground presence, "walk-in" centers for Iraqis staffed by Iraqis, and hiring a large number of Iraqi "animators" to carry and receive messages. Thirdly, information flow must be improved within the CPA itself through an integrated operations center that would extend across both the civilian and military sides of the CPA, and by enhancing cell-phone coverage and a system-wide email system that could ease the timely dissemination of information to all CPA personnel.

6. The United States needs to quickly mobilize a new reconstruction coalition that is significantly broader than the coalition that successfully waged the war. The scope of the challenges, the financial requirements, and rising anti-Americanism in parts of the country make necessary a new coalition that involves various international actors (including from countries and organizations that took no part in the original war coalition). The Council for International Cooperation at the CPA is a welcome innovation, but it must be dramatically expanded and supercharged if a new and inclusive coalition is to be built.

7. Money must be significantly more forthcoming and more flexible. Iraq will require significant outside support over the short to medium term. In addition to broadening the financial coalition to include a wider range of international actors, this means the President and Congress will need to budget and fully fund reconstruction costs through 2004. The CPA must be given rapid and flexible funding. "Business as usual" is not an option for operations in Iraq, nor can it be for their funding.

The enormity of the task ahead must not be underestimated. It requires that the entire effort be immediately turbo-charged - by making it more agile and flexible, and providing it with greater funding and personnel.

At the January 2004 meeting of the Economics of Security study group Johanna Mendelson-Forman, a member of the DoD team presented the report and updated the findings. The following report is based on her presentation.

The current situation in Iraq exemplifies an important change in the security environment, the “developmentalization” of security. Previously, post-conflict reconstruction tasks were shared by government institutions, civilian institutions, and NGOs. The Iraqi reconstruction process, by contrast, is owned by the Department of Defense; even Ambassador Paul Bremer, head of the Coalition Provisional Authority, reports to the DoD. Additionally, the term “post-conflict reconstruction” is less applicable now, because there is less distinction between the conflict itself and reconstruction. Indeed, many reconstruction tasks are now seen as part of “theater war,” and the current Iraqi reconstruction process is concurrent with fairly high levels of conflict.

Additional difficulty has arisen from the lack of communication between various departments. Under the Clinton Administration, Presidential Defense Directive (PDD)56 mapped the communication channels between departments. A similar document proposed by the Bush Administration has yet to be approved by the Defense Department.

These difficulties are dramatically apparent in Iraq, due to the enormous scope of the operation. One would expect such significant changes to create bumps in the road to reconstruction. Now, however, we may have missed the path towards a smooth reconstruction process as ethnic tensions and discontent are mounting.

The goals outlined in the post-conflict reconstruction team's report to the DoD remain. In order to redirect the reconstruction process, and provide long-term stability, the US must achieve the following: ensure the public safety, create Iraqi ownership of the reconstruction process, reduce the dramatically high unemployment among Iraqis, decentralize participation in the reconstruction process, better communicate our vision to Iraqis, internationalize the process, and provide sufficient funds, which will likely be several billion dollars.

Johanna Mendelson-Forman is Senior Program Officer at the United Nations Foundation in Washington, D.C.

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