

The “Day After” in Iraq

Lessons from Afghanistan

By Mark Sedra | March 2003

Much of the current debate on the crisis in Iraq focuses on the “day after” the fall of the Saddam Hussein regime. What will Iraq look like and how will the United States and the international community rebuild the country and fulfill its promise of “reshaping” it into a bastion of democracy for the entire region?

An examination of current efforts to rebuild Afghanistan provides some insight and a basis for speculation on how the challenge of rebuilding a post-war Iraq will be confronted. Comparisons between Afghanistan and Iraq should not be overemphasized as they simplify and conflate what are complicated and highly specific situations. Yet one cannot ignore the striking commonalities that can already be detected between the reconstruction approach implemented in Afghanistan and that which is being envisaged for Iraq. In recent weeks, U.S. officials have, on several occasions, referred to Afghanistan as a “successful” model for reconstruction and nation-building that should be emulated in Iraq. Similarly, United Nations (UN) planning for post-war Iraq has drawn heavily on the Afghan experience.

In a move with tremendous symbolism, a UN planning committee has chosen Lakhdar Brahimi, the Special Representative of the UN Secretary General in Afghanistan, to fulfill the same post in Iraq. If he accepts the appointment, Brahimi will lead the United Nations Assistance Mission in Iraq (UNAMI), a structure intended to mirror its Afghan counterpart, the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA).

UN and U.S. veneration of the Afghan nation-building experience contrasts sharply with its track record. Rising insecurity, slow economic development, and growing public dissatisfaction with the government currently threatens the post-war order in Afghanistan. Without delving into the debate over the merits and legality of the impending war in Iraq, it is important to ask why the reconstruction effort in Afghanistan is faltering and what can be done to avoid such an eventuality in post-war Iraq.

Afghanistan’s Lessons

Afghanistan has made remarkable progress since the fall of the Taliban in November 2001. However, achievements such as the establishment of a new currency, the Afghani,

and the return of two million refugees, have diverted international attention from a rapidly expanding security vacuum that threatens to envelope the nascent government. The Afghan Transitional Administration (ATA) holds little influence outside the confines of Kabul; tellingly, President Karzai is referred to in some quarters as the “mayor of Kabul.” The bulk of the country outside the capital is the domain of the warlords, who, by controlling private armies, can defy the central government at will. The resilience of spoiler groups, such as the Taliban, al Qaeda, and Gulbuddin Hekmatyar’s Hizb-I-Islami party, has presented an additional challenge to the post-Taliban order. Rising levels of violence across the country have illustrated the failure of peace-building efforts and the precariousness of the government’s position. In the past ten months there have been 400 rocket attacks on coalition military forces, scores of terrorist attacks, factional clashes that have claimed hundreds of civilian lives, the murder of a prominent cabinet minister, and a narrowly averted assassination attempt on President Karzai.

Efforts to strengthen the national government, build effective security forces, and stimulate economic development have failed to stem the tide of insecurity. In particular, programs to rebuild a national army and police force have been slow and ineffective. As of March 2003 only, 1,700 troops had graduated from the U.S.-supported army training program and the bulk of the country’s 50,000 police officers remain untrained and loyal to regional warlords rather than the central government. Unable to enforce its writ outside the capital, the ATA has had to rely on the good will of warlords and the strength of coalition military forces to maintain a semblance of legitimacy and control. Unfortunately, personal ambition rather than goodwill has driven the actions of the warlords and the military strategy adopted by coalition forces has been motivated more by short-term military expediency in the ongoing war on terror than the long-term interests of Afghan security and stability.



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Donor Failure in Afghanistan

While the life of the average Afghan has improved slightly over the past year, economic development has proceeded at a much slower rate than previously hoped. Unable to collect tax revenue due to warlord intransigence and allotted only a 16% share of the international reconstruction budget in 2002, ATA development initiatives have been paralyzed. The “Marshall Plan” for Afghanistan, which President Bush alluded to on numerous occasions in the aftermath of the fall of the Taliban, never materialized. At a donor conference in Kabul on 13 March 2003, President Karzai admitted, “the needs of Afghanistan...are much greater than what was estimated...at the Tokyo Donors conference.” He went on to affirm that an additional \$15-20 billion of aid was required to put the reconstruction process on track. Shortfalls in funding, combined with the slow pace of aid disbursements, the short-term duration of donor aid pledges, and the lack of labor-intensive investment in infrastructure, have rendered the ATA unable to deliver on its promises to the Afghan people. Deprived of their peace dividend, the Afghan populace has become increasingly restive. With donor fatigue growing and international attention shifting to the Middle East and the Korean Peninsula, the window of opportunity for rebuilding the country may be on the verge of closing.

The anticipated humanitarian crisis in Iraq will likely be even more severe than that which has gripped Afghanistan. After 23 years of almost continuous warfare, the Afghan population, which is primarily rural and agrarian, have developed highly advanced coping mechanisms. In contrast, the Iraqi populace, predominantly urban and dependent on government support, is much more vulnerable to the affects of war.

Implications for Iraq

The level of damage inflicted on Iraq’s infrastructure in the upcoming war is expected to be unprecedented in scope and severity. In a strategy that is intended to awe the Iraqi army into submission, the U.S. military forces will launch more than 3,000 precision-guided missiles at the country within the first 48 hours of the conflict. Not surprisingly, assessments of the needs of Iraqis in the immediate aftermath of the war are ominous. The World Health Organization (WHO) has estimated that 500,000 Iraqis could require immediate medical attention due to injuries sustained during the war and 400,000 could be stricken with disease caused by the destruction of sewage and water treatment facilities. It is expected that less than 39% of the population will have access to fresh water fol-

lowing the onset of hostilities. Currently, 16 million Iraqis are dependent on government food rations. The World Food Program (WFP) has stated that 10 million people could run out of food within the first six weeks of the war. A UN official has called U.S. and UN preparations to feed the Iraqi population “grossly inadequate.”

A refugee crisis, although not on the scale of that which has faced Afghanistan, is also likely to emerge. The UN estimates that even in a short war there could be an exodus of up to 1.45 million refugees to neighboring countries. In addition, they expect 900,000 Iraqis will become internally displaced—adding on to the 900,000-1,100,000 existing Internally Displaced Persons (IDP). The UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), while aware of scope of the problem, lacks the capacity to confront it. Of the \$60 million that UNHCR has requested to prepare for this dilemma, the agency has only received \$20 million. Overall, four key UN agencies—UNHCR, UNICEF, WFP, and the WHO—have only received \$40 million of the \$123.5 million they have requested to meet their targeted needs in Iraq.

The extent of the crisis and the lack of preparedness of international agencies to confront it will leave an increasing burden for humanitarian relief on the U.S. military, a responsibility it is ill-prepared to handle. The U.S. military’s foray into the area of humanitarian relief in Afghanistan, while still in an early stage, has achieved few tangible results and has been met with a torrent of criticism by intergovernmental agencies and NGOs who have argued that the military should focus on maintaining security and leave humanitarian relief to civilian organizations. In spite of this backlash and the program’s mixed level of success, the U.S. army has introduced a plan to “embed” humanitarian workers into military units to deliver relief in Iraq. This initiative, which will blur the distinction between military and humanitarian personnel and thereby place civilian humanitarian operations at risk, will be insufficient to meet the demands of the situation. However, with the U.S. government having allocated only \$1 million to position relief agencies in the region, there appear to be few other alternatives. This figure stands in stark contrast to the \$2.4 billion that the U.S. government has spent thus far to deploy troops to the Persian Gulf region. The U.S. “needs to be sending ships of wheat to the Persian Gulf, along with ships of soldiers” according to a UN official. The pronounced discrepancy between military and reconstruction spending, also present in Afghanistan where U.S. aid is equivalent to less than 5% of the funds spent on military operations—will have ominous long-term ramifications for the post-war reconstruction process.

Costs of Unilateralism

The unilateralist position adopted by the U.S. toward Iraq will make it difficult to secure international support, particularly from Europe, to rebuild the country. Chris Patten, the European Union (EU) Commissioner for External Relations, has warned that if the war does not have UN approval, the divisive nature of the issue among EU member states will make it very difficult for the EU to contribute to the reconstruction process on a large scale. Current estimates assert that it may cost up to \$30 billion to rebuild Iraq over a five-year period. This is in addition to the \$100 billion that the war will cost the U.S. taxpayer. Without a large-scale multilateral commitment to Iraq's reconstruction, such as that secured at the January 2002 Tokyo Donors Conference for Afghanistan, amassing the funds required for such a huge undertaking will be difficult.

Like Afghanistan, Iraq will have to face an imposing security vacuum in the aftermath of the fall of the Ba'athist regime. The presence of 300,000 U.S. troops, which according to U.S. military officials will be utilized to occupy the country in the immediate aftermath of the conflict, could have a positive stabilizing affect that was conspicuously absent in Afghanistan, where only a relatively small number of foreign troops were deployed. However, the imposition of an occupation authority to govern the country for any longer than a few months could incite a violent reaction from the populace. Iraqis should have full executive powers in any governing authority established after the war. The current U.S. post-war blueprint, which calls for the establishment of an international civil authority headed by a high-ranking American military commander with Iraqi exile leaders serving only in an advisory capacity, will only arouse apprehension that the U.S. has imperialist designs on Iraq.

There are two other factors that could conceivably trigger an escalation of violence and instability in Iraq. First, like Afghanistan, Iraq is a diverse society, divided on ethnic, religious, and factional lines. The Ba'athist regime, like the Pashtun-based Taliban movement, is predominantly composed of one ethnic group, the Sunni Arabs. Both regimes viciously repressed dissent emanating from competing ethnic groups, resentful of their lack of representation in the government. The fall of the Taliban in Afghanistan led to widespread violence, marked by human rights violations, against ethnic Pashtuns throughout Afghanistan and engendered resentment and anti-government sentiments within the Pashtun community. There are fears that revenge attacks against the Sunni minority by other ethnic groups such as the Shiites, Kurds, and Turkomons, who were violently subjugated by President Saddam

Hussein, could emerge following the war. While it is unlikely that these groups will seek independence, ethnic-based clashes could nevertheless fragment the country.

Second, the intervention of neighboring states could inflame internal rivalries and generate conflict. The Turkish government has indicated that in the event of war it would intervene in the northern, Kurdish-controlled region of Iraq to prevent the formation of a Kurdish state, which Ankara fears could arouse nationalist sentiment among the Kurdish population of Turkey. Any Turkish intervention would be violently resisted by Kurdish paramilitary groups, deeply suspicious of Turkish motivations. There are also fears that Iran, endeavoring to safeguard the large Shiite population of Iraq may also intervene in Iraqi affairs, arousing the consternation of the Sunni population of Iraq and neighboring states such as Saudi Arabia, which has long feared the extension of Iranian influence in the region. Regional interference is a problem that has also plagued Afghanistan, where neighboring states such as Pakistan, Iran, and Uzbekistan have promoted their interests via proxies. It has had a highly destabilizing affect on the country, promoting ethnic and factional clashes that have exacerbated disunity.

In a worst-case scenario, the imposing cost of reconstruction coupled with the potential for violent unrest may prompt the U.S. to implement a minimalist post-war reconstruction strategy. The objective of such a strategy would be to stabilize the country and secure America's vital interests, including the disarmament of the regime and the safeguarding of oil wells, at a minimum material and human cost. This could involve establishing a client government in Baghdad; maintaining a semi-permanent military presence in oil-producing areas; permitting limited Turkish intervention in the North; and allowing regional autonomy on ethnic lines across the country. A similar situation has materialized in Afghanistan where the U.S. has installed a client government in Kabul; where regional warlords hold sway in the provinces; where a blind eye is turned to the interference of regional states such as Pakistan; and where a U.S. military presence is maintained to pursue regional interests, which in the Afghan context is the continuing hunt for the remnants of the Taliban and al Qaeda.

Policy Recommendations

A number of specific lessons can be drawn from the Afghan experience that should be heeded by the international community when formulating a reconstruction plan for post-war Iraq.

First, the aid pipeline to Iraq must be free of obstacles and cumbersome bureaucratic constraints. In Afghanistan, the flow of aid continues to be slow, a factor that has obstructed development and undermined the central administration's legitimacy.

Second, the bulk of international aid should be funneled to the indigenous central government as opposed to NGOs and intergovernmental organizations. NGO competition for resources, responsibilities, and territory in Afghanistan has led to a "projectization" of the reconstruction process, a fragmentation of the process along institutional and project lines. Accordingly, the process has lacked continuity and coherence and has been plagued by problems of transparency and coordination. NGOs play a vital role in post-conflict settings as facilitators of change. In Afghanistan they have transcended this role, becoming agents of change, a position that should be reserved for local actors.

Third, a pronounced effort must be taken to promote reconciliation and prevent the country's balkanization along ethnic or factional lines. In Afghanistan, regional warlords took advantage of the security vacuum that emerged in the aftermath of the Taliban's fall to establish strongholds of varying size across the country, creating what are in effect mini-states. Although the presence of over 300,000 American troops will be a strong deterrent against such an eventuality, it is essential that the process of reconciliation among Iraq's various ethnic and religious groups, Sunni, Shiite, Kurd, and Turkoman is initiated at an early stage of the post-war period.

Fourth, U.S. and coalition forces must cooperate closely with the central government, coordinating their planning and actions with newly established security institutions. In Afghanistan, the U.S. has pursued the war on terror with little or no consultation with the central government. In fact, its strategy of allying with local warlords has contravened the ATA's authority and irrevocably damaged its legitimacy. It is critical that U.S. forces recognize and respect the sovereignty of the post-war administrations of Afghanistan and Iraq.

Fifth, pressure must be exerted on regional states, such as Iran, Turkey, and Saudi Arabia, to refrain from interfering in the internal affairs of Iraq. Afghanistan has a long history of being utilized as a pawn in regional power struggles, a phenomenon that continues to this day with disastrous implications. The Afghan experience demonstrates the necessity of securing unconditional regional support for post-war reconstruction and peace-building activities.

Lastly, in Iraq more emphasis must be placed on security sector reform, a process that fulfills a vital criterion of statehood: a state monopoly on the use of force. Although security sector reform was prioritized early on in the Afghan reconstruction agenda, the process has been largely ineffective due to mismanagement, inefficiency, and a lack of funds. Such deficiencies must be rectified in Iraq if a new government is to assert its authority over the country within the next five years.

A theme that runs like a red thread through these recommendations is the need to build a strong central state. While in the long run federal models of governance may be more suitable for these countries, a strong and representative central state apparatus is required to achieve stability and security in the short-term. In the case of Afghanistan, this policy has been widely endorsed by policymakers and analysts, yet it has not been properly implemented.

Afghanistan and Iraq, wracked by decades of conflict and deprivation, require intensive, long-term, and durable commitments of international support. Although sustainable change can only emanate from within post-conflict societies, external support is essential to provide the fertile ground needed for such change to flourish. Peace building and reconstruction have faltered in Afghanistan not because of the failures of the ATA, which has achieved a remarkable degree of stability under extremely adverse conditions, but because the international community's commitment to rebuilding the country has wavered. A steady shift of international attention away from Afghanistan over the past six months, a phenomenon that one senior European diplomat has dubbed the "CNN effect," has expedited the deterioration of the international commitment to Afghanistan. The emergence of a similar shift in Iraq, perhaps toward the next country on the Bush administration's "axis of evil," will have similar consequences for the Iraqi reconstruction process. Afghanistan has been a proving ground for the world's ability to collectively rebuild a state and fight the roots of terrorism in the post-September 11 world. The results of this first test of the world's resolve have been less than exemplary and without a paradigm shift in the international community's approach to reconstruction and peace building, the prospects for the next test appear dim.

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